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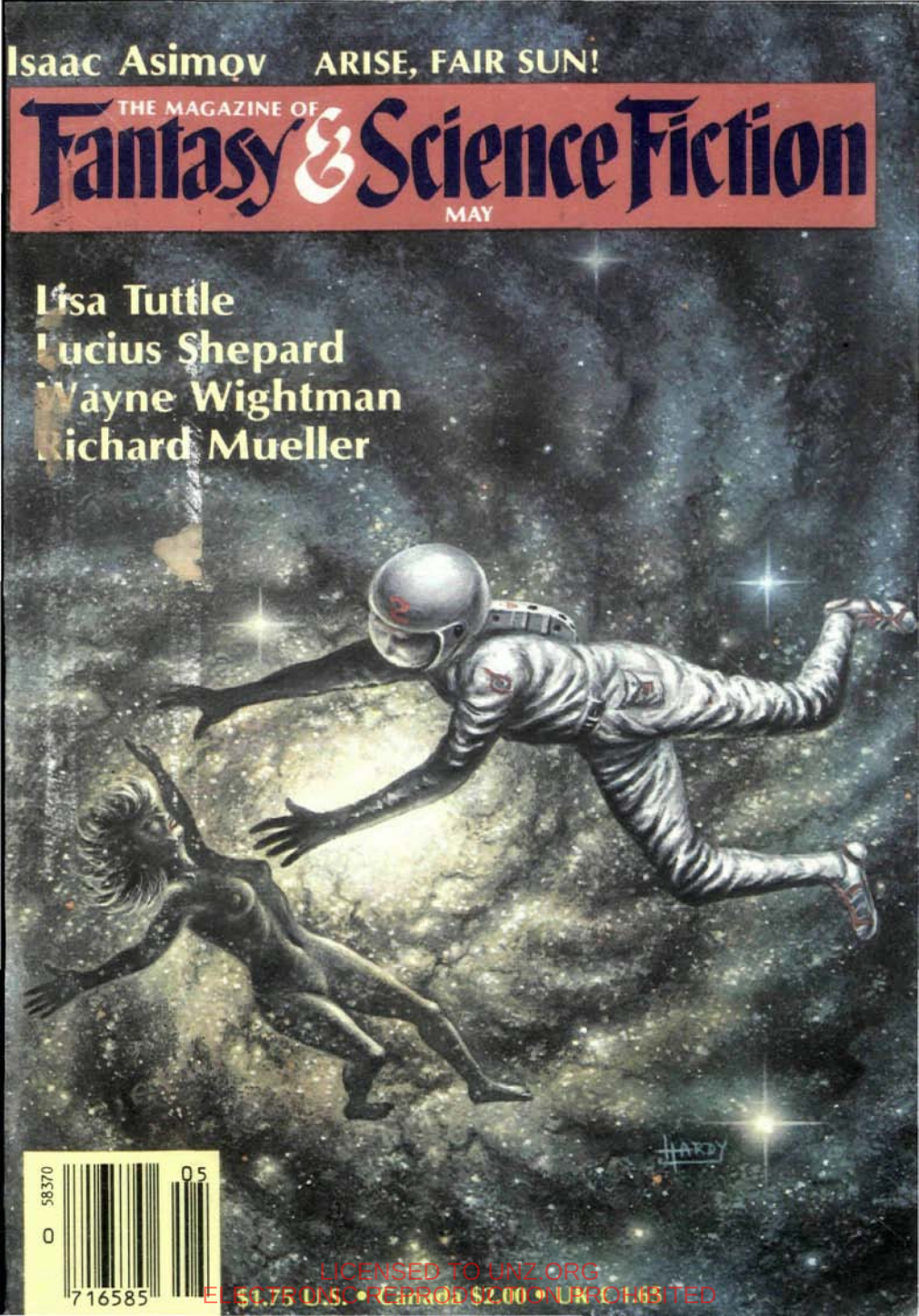

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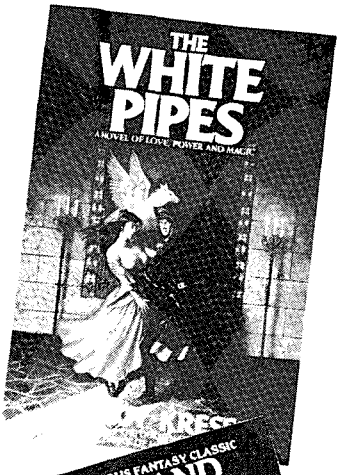

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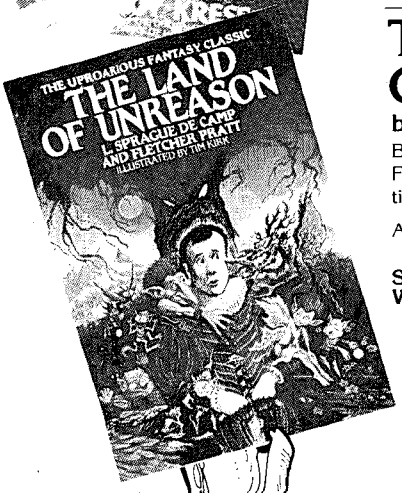

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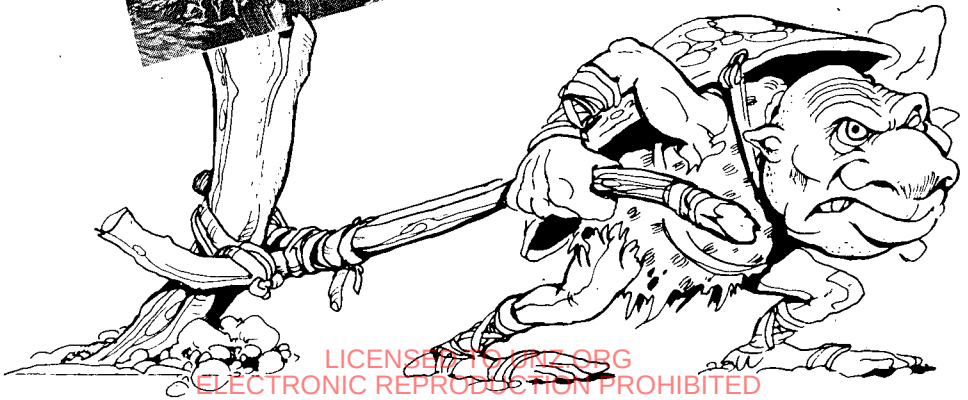

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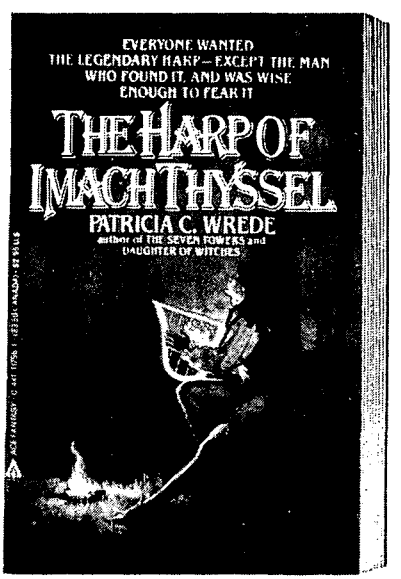
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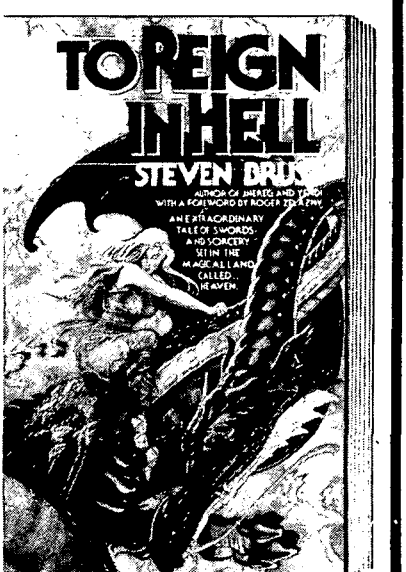

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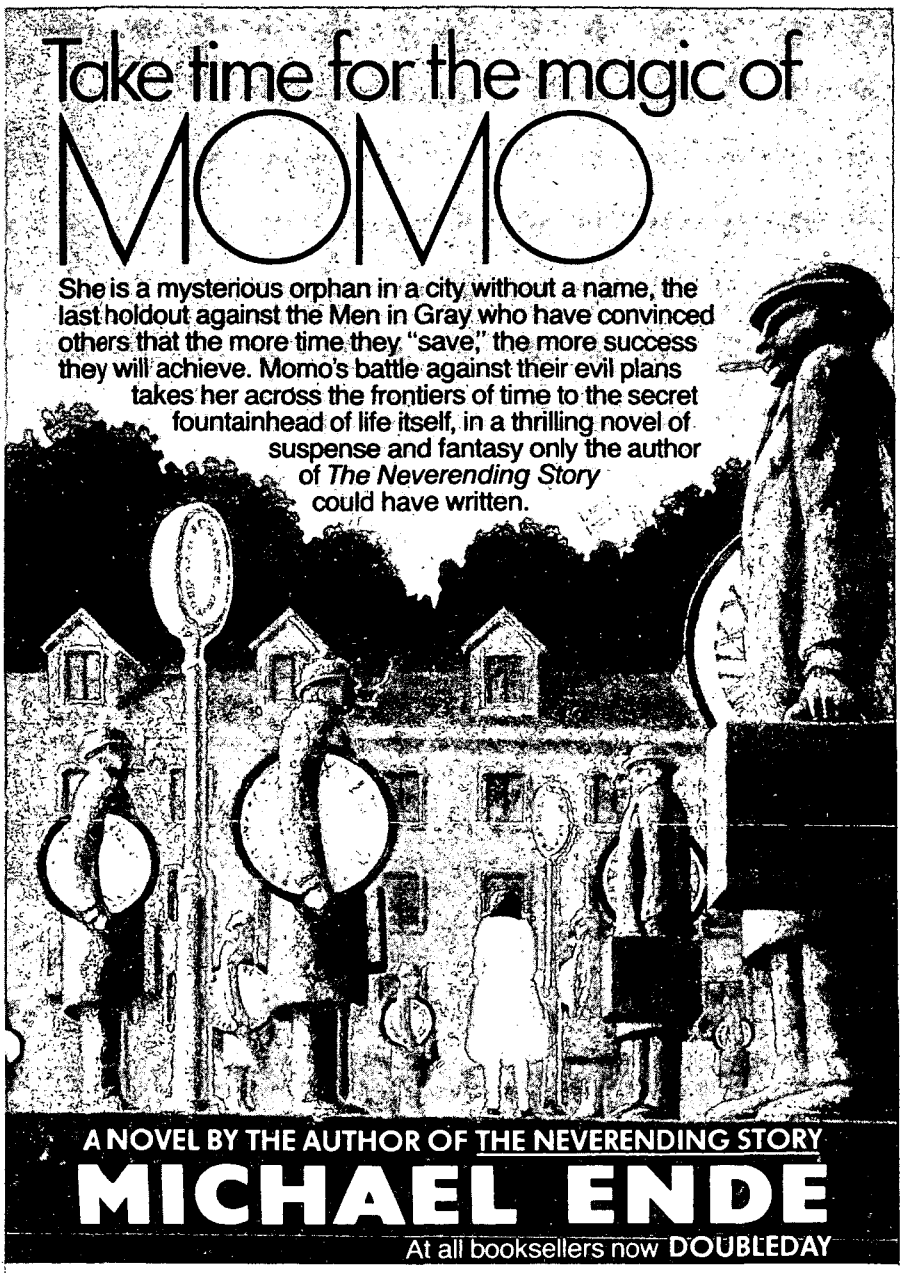
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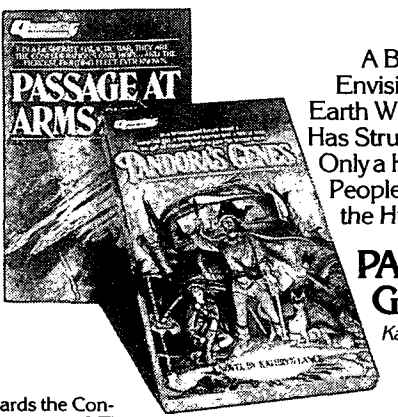

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"'The Jaguar Hunter'," Lucius Shepard writes, "Is the second story I have set in Puerto Morada, the setting of 'Solitario's Eyes' (September 1983) .... It might be of interest to know that the method of hunting jaguars outlined in the story is not a product of my imagination. I met an old guy in Honduras who claimed to have done in — like the protagonist of the story — almost fifty jaguars by this method." In "The Jaguar Hunter," however, the protagonist finds himself capturing something that is a bit more than just a jaguar.

The Jaguar Hunter

BY
LUCIUS SHEPARD

It was his wife's debt to Onofrio Esteves, the appliance dealer, that brought Esteban Caax to town for the first time in almost a year. By nature he was a man who enjoyed the sweetness of the countryside above all else; the placid measures of a farmer's day invigorated him, and he took great pleasure in nights spent joking and telling stories around a fire, or lying beside his wife, Incarnación. Puerto Morada, with its fruit company imperatives and sullen dogs and cantinas that blared American music, was a place he avoided like the plague: indeed, from his home atop the mountain whose slopes formed the northernmost enclosure of Bahía Onda, the rusted tin roofs ringing the bay resembled a dried crust of blood such as might appear upon the lips of a dying man.

On this particular morning, however, he had no choice but to visit the town. Incarnación had — without his knowledge — purchased a battery-operated television set on credit from Onofrio, and he was threatening to seize Esteban's three milk cows in lieu of the eight hundred lempiras that was owed; he refused to accept the return of the television, but had sent word that he was willing to discuss an alternate method of payment. Should Esteban lose the cows, his income would drop below a subsistence level, and he would be forced to take up his old occupation, an occupation far more onerous than farming.

As he walked down the mountain, past huts of thatch and brushwood poles identical to his own, following a trail that wound through sun-browned thickets lorded over by banana trees, he was not thinking of Onofrio but of Incarnación. It was in

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in her nature to be frivolous, and he had known this when he had married her; yet the television was emblematic of the differences that had developed between them since their children had reached maturity. She had begun to put on sophisticated airs, to laugh at Esteban's country ways, and she had become the doyenne of a group of older women, mostly widows, all of whom aspired to sophistication. Each night they would huddle around the television and strive to outdo one another in making sagacious comments about the American detective shows they watched; and each night Esteban would sit outside the hut and gloomily ponder the state of his marriage. He believed Incarnación's association with the widows was her manner of telling him that she looked forward to adopting the black skirt and shawl, that — having served his purpose as a father — he was now an impediment to her. Though she was only forty-one, younger by three years than Esteban, she was withdrawing from the life of the senses; they rarely made love anymore, and he was certain that this partially embodied her resentment of the fact that the years had been kind to him. He had the look of one of the Old Patuca — tall, with chiseled featurs and wide-set eyes; his coppery skin was relatively unlined and his hair jet black. Incarnación's hair was streaked with gray, and the clean beauty of her limbs had dissolved beneath layers of fat. He had not expected her to remain beautiful, and he had tried to assure her that he loved the woman she was and not merely the girl she had been. But that woman was dying, infected by the same disease that had infected Puerto Morada, and perhaps his love for her was dying, too.

The dusty street on which the appliance store was situated ran in back of the movie theater and the Hotel Circo Del Mar, and from the inland side of the street Esteban could see the bell towers of Santa María del Onda rising above the hotel roof like the horns of a great stone snail. As a young man, obeying his mother's wish that he become a priest, he had spent three years cloistered beneath those towers, preparing for the seminary under the tutelage of old Father Gonsalvo. It was the part of his life he most regretted, because the academic disciplines he had mastered seemed to have stranded him between the world of the Indian and that of contemporary society; in his heart he held to his father's teachings — the principles of magic, the history of the tribe, the lore of nature — and yet he could never escape the feeling that such wisdom was either superstitious or simply unimportant. The shadows of the towers lay upon his soul as surely as they did upon the cobbled square in front of the church, and the sight of them caused him to pick up his pace and lower his eyes.

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Farther along the street was the Cantina Atomica, a gathering place for the well-to-do youth of the town, and across from it was the appliance store, a one-story building of yellow stucco with corrugated metal doors that were lowered at night. Its facade was decorated by a mural that supposedly represented the merchandise within: sparkling refrigerators and televisions and washing machines, all given the impression of enormity by the tiny men and women painted below them, their hands upflung in awe. The actual merchandise was much less imposing, consisting mainly of radios and used kitchen equipment. Few people in Puerto Morada could afford more, and those who could generally bought elsewhere. The majority of Onofrio's clientele were poor, hard-pressed to meet his schedule of payments, and to a large degree his wealth derived from selling repossessed appliances over and over.

Raimundo Esteves, a pale young man with puffy cheeks and heavily lidded eyes and a petulant mouth, was leaning against the counter when Esteban entered; Raimundo smirked and let out a piercing whistle, and a few seconds later his father emerged from the back room: a huge slug of a man, even paler than Raimundo. Filaments of gray hair were slicked down across his mottled scalp, and his belly stretched the front of a starched *guayabera*. He beamed and extended a hand.

"How good to see you," he said. "Raimundo! Bring us coffee and two chairs."

Much as he disliked Onofrio, Esteban was in no position to be uncivil: he accepted the handshake. Raimundo spilled coffee in the saucers and clattered the chairs and glowered, angry at being forced to serve an Indian.

"Why will you not let me return the television?" asked Esteban after taking a seat; and then, unable to bite back the words, he added, "Is it no longer your policy to swindle my people?"

Onofrio sighed, as if it were exhausting to explain things to a fool such as Esteban. "I do not swindle your people. I go beyond the letter of the contracts in allowing them to make returns rather than pursuing matters through the courts. In your case, however, I have devised a way whereby you can keep the television without any further payments and yet settle the account. Is this a swindle?"

It was pointless to argue with a man whose logic was as facile and self-serving as Onofrio's. "Tell me what you want," said Esteban.

Onofrio wetted his lips, which were the color of raw sausage. "I want you to kill the jaguar of Barrio Carolina."

"I no longer hunt," said Esteban.

"The Indian is afraid," said Raimundo, moving up behind Onofrio's shoulder. "I told you."

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Onofrio waved him away and said to Esteban, "That is unreasonable. If I take the cows, you will once again be hunting jaguars. But if you do this, you will have to hunt only one jaguar."

"One that has killed eight hunters." Esteban set down his coffee cup and stood. "It is no ordinary jaguar."

Raimundo laughed disparagingly, and Esteban skewered him with a stare.

"Ah!" said Onofrio, smiling a flatterer's smile. "But none of the eight used your method."

"Your pardon, *don* Onofrio," said Esteban with mock formality. "I have other business to attend."

"I will pay you five hundred lempiras in addition to erasing the debt," said Onofrio.

"Why?" asked Esteban. "Forgive me, but I cannot believe it is due to a concern for the public welfare."

Onofrio's fat throat pulsed, his face darkened.

"Never mind," said Esteban. "It is not enough."

"Very well. A thousand." Onofrio's casual manner could not conceal the anxiety in his voice.

Intrigued, curious to learn the extent of Onofrio's anxiety, Esteban plucked a figure from the air. "Ten thousand," he said. "And in advance."

"Ridiculous! I could hire ten hunters for this much! Twenty!"

Esteban shrugged. "But none with my method."

For a moment Onofrio sat with his hands enlaced, twisting them, as if struggling with some pious conception. "All right," he said, the words squeezed out of him. "Ten thousand!"

The reason for Onofrio's interest in Barrio Carolina suddenly dawned on Esteban, and he understood that the profits involved would make his fee seem pitifully small. But he was possessed by the thought of what ten thousand lempiras could mean: a herd of cows, a small truck to haul produce, or — and as he thought it, he realized this was the happiest possibility — the little stucco house in Barrio Clarín that Incarnación had set her heart on. Perhaps owning it would soften her toward him. He noticed Raimundo staring at him, his expression a knowing smirk; and even Onofrio, though still outraged by the fee, was beginning to show signs of satisfaction, adjusting the fit of his *guayabera*, slicking down his already-slicked-down hair. Esteban felt debased by their capacity to buy him, and to preserve a last shred of dignity, he turned and walked to the door.

"I will consider it," he tossed back over his shoulder. "And I will give you my answer in the morning."

"Murder Squad of New York," starring a bald American actor, was the featured attraction on Incarnación's television that night, and the widows sat cross-legged on the floor, filling the hut so completely that the charcoal stove and the sleeping hammock

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had been moved outside in order to provide good viewing angles for the latecomers. To Esteban, standing in the doorway, it seemed his home had been invaded by a covey of large black birds with cowled heads, who were receiving evil instruction from the core of a flickering gray jewel. Reluctantly, he pushed between them and made his way to the shelves mounted on the wall behind the set; he reached up to the top shelf and pulled down a long bundle wrapped in oil-stained newspapers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Incarnación watching him, her lips thinned, curved in a smile, and that cicatrix of a smile branded its mark on Esteban's heart. She knew what he was about, and she was delighted! Not in the least worried! Perhaps she had known of Onofrio's plan to kill the jaguar, perhaps she had schemed with Onofrio to entrap him. Infuriated, he barged through the widows, setting them to gabbling, and walked out into his banana grove and sat on a stone amidst it. The night was cloudy, and only a handful of stars showed between the tattered dark shapes of the leaves; the wind sent the leaves slithering together, and he heard one of his cows snorting and smelled the ripe odor of the corral. It was as if the solidity of his life had been reduced to this isolated perspective, and he bitterly felt the isolation. Though he would admit to fault in the marriage, he could think of nothing he had done that could have bred Incarnación's hateful smile.

After a while, he unwrapped the bundle of newspapers and drew out a thin-bladed machete of the sort used to chop banana stalks, but which he used to kill jaguars. Just holding it renewed his confidence and gave him a feeling of strength It had been four years since he had hunted, yet he knew he had not lost the skill. Once he had been proclaimed the greatest hunter in the province of Neuva Esperanza, as had his father before him, and he had not retired from hunting because of age or infirmity, but because the jaguars were beautiful, and their beauty had begun to outweigh the reasons he had for killing them. He had no better reason to kill the jaguar of Barrio Carolina. It menaced no one other than those who hunted it, who sought to invade its territory, and its death would profit only a dishonorable man and a shrewish wife, and would spread the contamination of Puerto Morada. And besides, it was a black jaguar.

"Black jaguars," his father had told him, "are creatures of the moon. They have other forms and magical purposes with which we must not interfere. Never hunt them!"

His father had not said that the black jaguars lived on the moon, simply that they utilized its power; but as a child, Esteban had dreamed about a moon of ivory forests and silver meadows through which the jaguars

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flowed as swiftly as black water; and when he had told his father of the dreams, his father had said that such dreams were representations of a truth, and that sooner or later he would discover the truth underlying them. Esteban had never stopped believing in the dreams, not even in face of the rocky, airless place depicted by the science programs on Incarnación's television: that moon, its mystery explained, was merely a less enlightening kind of dream, a statement of fact that reduced reality to the knowable.

But as he thought this, Esteban suddenly realized that killing the jaguar might be the solution to his problems, that by going against his father's teaching, that by killing his dreams, his Indian conception of the world, he might be able to find accord with his wife's; he had been standing halfway between the two conceptions for too long, and it was time for him to choose. And there was no real choice. It was this world he inhabited, not that of the jaguars; if it took the death of a magical creature to permit him to embrace as joys the television and trips to the movies and a stucco house in Barrio Clarín, well, he had faith in this method. He swung the machete, slicing the dark air, and laughed. Incarnación's frivolousness, his skill at hunting, Onofrio's greed, the jaguar, the television . . . all these things were neatly woven together like the elements of a spell, one whose products would be a denial of magic and a furthering of the unmagical doctrines that had corrupted Puerto Morada. He laughed again, but a second later he chided himself: it was exactly this sort of thinking he was preparing to root out.

Esteban waked Incarnacion early the next morning and forced her to accompany him to the appliance store. His machete swung by his side in a leather sheath, and he carried a burlap sack containing food and the herbs he would need for the hunt. Incarnación trotted along beside him, silent, her face hidden by a shawl. When they reached the store, Esteban had Onofrio stamp the bill PAID IN FULL, then he handed the bill and the money to Incarnación.

"If I kill the jaguar or if it kills me," he said harshly, "this will be yours. Should I fail to return within a week, you may assume that I will never return."

She retreated a step, her face registering alarm, as if she had seen him in new light and understood the consequences of her actions; but she made no move to stop him as he walked out the door.

Across the street, Raimundo Esteves was leaning against the wall of the Cantina Atomica, talking to two girls wearing jeans and frilly blouses; the girls were fluttering their hands and dancing to the music that issued

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from the cantina, and to Esteban they seemed more alien than the creature he was to hunt. Raimundo spotted him and whispered to the girls; they peeked over their shoulders and laughed. Already angry at Incarnación, Esteban was washed over by a cold fury. He crossed the street to them, rested his hand on the hilt of the machete, and stared at Raimundo; he had never before noticed how soft he was, how empty of presence. A crop of pimples straggled along his jaw, the flesh beneath his eyes was pocked by tiny indentations like those made by a silversmith's hammer, and, unequal to the stare, his eyes darted back and forth between the two girls.

Esteban's anger dissolved into revulsion. "I am Esteban Caax," he said. "I have built my own house, tilled my soil, and brought four children into the world. This day I am going to hunt the jaguar of Barrio Carolina in order to make you and your father even fatter than you are." He ran his gaze up and down Raimundo's body and, letting his voice fill with disgust, he asked, "Who are you?"

Raimundo's puffy face cinched in a knot of hatred, but he offered no response. The girls tittered and skipped through the door of the cantina; Esteban could hear them describing the incident, laughter, and he continued to stare at Raimundo. Several other girls poked their heads out the door, giggling and whispering. After a moment, Esteban spun on his heel and walked away. Behind him there was a chorus of unrestrained laughter, and a girl's voice called mockingly, "Raimundo! Who are you?" Other voices joined in, and it soón became a chant.

Barrio Carolina was not truly a barrio of Puerto Morada; it lay beyond Punta Manabique, the southernmost enclosure of the bay, and was fronted by a palm hammock and the loveliest stretch of beach in all the province, a curving slice of white sand giving way to jade-green shallows. Forty years before, it had been the headquarters of the fruit company's experimental farm, a project of such vast scope that a small town had been built on the site: rows of white frame houses with shingle roofs and screen porches, the kind you might see in a magazine illustration of rural America. The company had touted the project as being the keystone of the country's future, and had promised to develop high-yield crops that would banish starvation; but in 1947 a cholera epidemic had ravaged the coast and the town had been abandoned. By the time the cholera scare had died down, the company had become well-entrenched in national politics and no longer needed to maintain a benevolent image; the project had been dropped and the property abandoned until — in the same year that Esteban had retired from hunting — developers had bought it, planning to build a major resort. It was then the

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jaguar had appeared. Though it had not killed any of the workmen, it had terrorized them to the point that they had refused to begin the job. Hunters had been sent, and these the jaguar *had* killed. The last party of hunters had been equipped with automatic rifles, all manner of technological aids; but the jaguar had picked them off one by one, and this project, too, had been abandoned. Rumor had it that the land had recently been resold (now Esteban knew to whom), and that the idea of a resort was once more under consideration.

The walk from Puerto Morada was hot and tiring, and upon arrival Esteban sat beneath a palm and ate a lunch of cold banana fritters. Combers as white as toothpaste broke on the shore, and there was no human litter, just dead fronds and driftwood and coconuts. All but four of the houses had been swallowed by the jungle, and only sections of those four remained visible, embedded like moldering gates in a blackish green wall of vegetation. Even under the bright sunlight, they were haunted-looking: their screens ripped, boards weathered gray, vines cascading over their facades. A mango tree had sprouted from one of the porches, and wild parrots were eating its fruit. He had not visited the barrio since childhood: the ruins had frightened him then, but now he found them appealing, testifying to the dominion of natural law. It distressed him that he would help transform it all into a place where the parrots would be chained to perches and the jaguars would be designs on tablecloths, a place of swimming pools and tourists sipping from coconut shells. Nonetheless, after he had finished lunch, he set out to explore the jungle and soon discovered a trail used by the jaguar: a narrow path that wound between the vine-matted shells of the houses for about a half mile and ended at the Rio Dulce. The river was a murkier green than the sea, curving away through the jungle walls; the jaguar's tracks were everywhere along the bank, especially thick upon a tussocky rise some five or six feet above the water. This baffled Esteban. The jaguar could not drink from the rise, and it certainly would not sleep there. He puzzled over it awhile, but eventually shrugged it off, returned to the beach, and, because he planned to keep watch that night, took a nap beneath the palms.

Some hours later, around midafternoon, he was started from his nap by a voice hailing him. A tall, slim, copper-skinned woman was walking toward him, wearing a dress of dark green — almost the exact color of the jungle walls — that exposed the swell of her breasts. As she drew near, he saw that though her features had a Patucan cast, they were of a lapidary fineness uncommon to the tribe; it was as if they had been refined into a lovely mask: cheeks planed into subtle hollows, lips sculpted full,

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stylized feathers of ebony inlaid for eyebrows, eyes of jet and white onyx, and all this given a human gloss. A sheen of sweat covered her breasts, and a single curl of black hair lay over her collarbone, so artful-seeming it appeared to have been placed there by design. She knelt beside him, gazing at him impassively, and Esteban was flustered by her heated air of sensuality. The sea breeze bore her scent to him, a sweet musk that reminded him of mangoes left ripening in the sun.

"My name is Esteban Caax," he said, painfully aware of his own sweaty odor.

"I have heard of you," she said. "The jaguar hunter. Have you come to kill the jaguar of the barrio?"

"Yes," he said, and felt shame at admitting it.

She picked up a handful of sand and watched it sift through her fingers.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"If we become friends, I will tell you my name," she said. "Why must you kill the jaguar?"

He told her about the television set, and then, to his surprise, he found himself describing his problems with Incarnación, explaining how he intended to adapt to her ways. These were not proper subjects to discuss with a stranger, yet he was lured to intimacy; he thought he sensed an affinity between them, and that prompted him to portray his marriage as more dismal than it was, for though he had never once been unfaithful to Incarnación, he would have welcomed the chance to do so now.

"This is a black jaguar," she said. "Surely you know they are not ordinary animals, that they have purposes with which we must not interfere?"

Esteban was startled to hear his father's words from her mouth, but he dismissed it as coincidence and replied, "Perhaps. But they are not mine."

"Truly, they are," she said. "You have simply chosen to ignore them." She scooped up another handful of sand. "How will you do it? You have no gun. Only a machete."

"I have this as well," he said, and from his sack he pulled out a small parcel of herbs and handed it to her.

She opened it and sniffed the contents. "Herbs? Ah! You plan to drug the jaguar."

"Not the jaguar. Myself." He took back the parcel. "The herbs slow the heart and give the body a semblance of death. They induce a trance, but one that can be thrown off at a moment's notice. After I chew them, I will lie down in a place that the jaguar must pass on its nightly hunt. It will think I am dead, but it will not feed unless it is sure that the spirit has left the flesh, and to determine this, it will sit on the body so it can feel the spirit rise up. As soon as it starts to settle, I will throw off the trance and stab it between the ribs. If

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my hand is steady, it will die instantly."

"And if your hand is unsteady?"

"I have killed nearly fifty jaguars," he said. "I no longer fear unsteadiness. The method comes down through my family from the Old Patuca, and it has never failed, to my knowledge."

"But a black jaguar . . ."

"Black or spotted, it makes no difference. Jaguars are creatures of instinct, and one is like another when it comes to feeding."

"Well," she said, "I cannot wish you luck, but neither do I wish you ill." She came to her feet, brushing the sand from her dress.

He wanted to ask her to stay, but pride prevented him, and she laughed as if she knew his mind.

"Perhaps we will talk again, Esteban," she said. "It would be a pity if we did not, for more lies between us than we have spoken of this day."

She walked swiftly down the beach, becoming a diminutive black figure that was rippled away by the heat haze.

That evening, needing a place from which to keep watch, Esteban pried open the screen door of one of the houses facing the beach and went onto the porth. Chameleons skittered into the corners, and an iguana slithered off a rusted lawn chair sheathed in spiderweb and vanished through a gap in the floor. The interior of the house was dark and forbidding, except for the bathroom, the roof of which was missing, webbed over by vines that admitted a gray-green infusion of twilight. The cracked toilet was full of rainwater and dead insects. Uneasy, Esteban returned to the porch, cleaned the lawn chair, and sat.

Out on the horizon the sea and sky were blending in a haze of silver and gray; the wind had died, and the palms were as still as sculpture; a string of pelicans flying low above the waves seemed to be spelling a sentence of cryptic black syllables. But the eerie beauty of the scene was lost on him. He could not stop thinking of the woman. The memory of her hips rolling beneath the fabric of her dress as she walked away was repeated over and over in his thoughts, and whenever he tried to turn his attention to the matter at hand, the memory became more compelling. He imagined her naked, the play of muscles rippling her haunches, and this so enflamed him that he started to pace, unmindful of the fact that the creaking boards were signaling his presence. He could not understand her effect upon him. Perhaps, he thought, it was her defense of the jaguar, her calling to mind of all he was putting behind him . . . and then a realization settled over him like an icy shroud.

It was commonly held among the Patuca that a man about to suffer a

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solitary and unexpected death would be visited by an envoy of death, who — standing in for family and friends — would prepare him to face the event; and Esteban was now very sure that the woman had been such an envoy, that her allure had been specifically designed to attract his soul to its imminent fate. He sat back down in the lawn chair, numb with the realization. Her knowledge of his father's words, the odd flavor of her conversation, her intimation that more lay between them: it all accorded perfectly with the traditional wisdom. The moon rose three-quarters full, silvering the sands of the barrio, and still he sat there, rooted to the spot by his fear of death.

He had been watching the jaguar for several seconds before he registered its presence. It seemed at first that a scrap of night sky had fallen onto the sand and was being blown by a fitful breeze; but soon he saw that it was the jaguar, that it was inching along as if stalking some prey. Then it leaped high into the air, twisting and turning, and began to race up and down the beach: a ribbon of black water flowing across the silver sands. He had never before seen a jaguar at play, and this alone was cause for wonder; but most of all, he wondered at the fact that here were his childhood dreams come to life. He might have been peering out onto a silvery meadow of the moon, spying on one of its magical creatures. His fear was eroded by the sight, and like a child he pressed his nose to the screen, trying not to blink, anxious that he might miss a single moment.

At length the jaguar left off its play and came prowling up the beach toward the jungle. By the set of its ears and the purposeful sway of its walk, Esteban recognized that it was hunting. It stopped beneath a palm about twenty feet from the house, lifted its head, and tested the air. Moonlight frayed down through the fronds, applying liquid gleams to its haunches; its eyes, glinting yellow-green, were like peepholes into a lurid dimension of fire. The jaguar's beauty was heart-stopping — the embodiment of a flawless principle — and Esteban, contrasting this beauty with the pallid ugliness of his employer, with the ugly principle that had led to his hiring, doubted that he could ever bring himself to kill it.

All the following day he debated the question. He had hoped the woman would return, because he had rejected the idea that she was death's envoy — that perception, he thought, must have been induced by the mysterious atmosphere of the barrio — and he felt that if she were to argue the jaguar's cause again, he would let himself be persuaded. But she did not put in an appearance, and as he sat upon the beach, watching the evening sun decline through strata of dusky orange and lavender clouds, casting wild glitters over the sea, he under-

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stood once more that he had no choice. Whether or not the jaguar was beautiful, whether or not the woman had been on a supernatural errand, he must treat these things as if they had no substance. The point of the hunt had been to deny mysteries of this sort, and he had lost sight of it under the influence of old dreams.

He waited until moonrise to take the herbs, and then lay down beneath the palm tree where the jaguar had paused the previous night. Lizards whispered past in the grasses, sand fleas hopped onto his face: he hardly felt them, sinking deeper into the languor of the herbs. The fronds overhead showed an ashen green in the moonlight, lifting, rustling; and the stars between their feathered edges flickered crazily as if the breeze were fanning their flames. He became immersed in the landscape, savoring the smells of brine and rotting foliage that were blowing across the beach, drifting with them; but when he heard the pad of the jaguar's step, he came alert. Through narrowed eyes he saw it sitting a dozen feet away, a bulky shadow craning its neck toward him, investigating his scent. After a moment it began to circle him, each circle a bit tighter than the one before, and whenever it passed out of view, he had to repress a trickle of fear. Then, as it passed close on the seaward side, he caught a whiff of its odor.

A sweet, musky odor that reminded him of mangoes left ripening in the sun.

Fear welled up in him, and he tried to banish it, to tell himself that the odor could not possibly be what he thought. The jaguar snarled, a razor stroke of sound that slit the peaceful mesh of wind and surf, and realizing it had scented his fear, he sprang to his feet, waving his machete. In a whirl of vision, he saw the jaguar leap back, he shouted at it, waved the machete again, and sprinted for the house where he had kept watch. He slipped through the door and went staggering into the front room. There was a crash behind him, and turning, he had a glimpse of a huge black shape struggling to extricate itself from a moonlit tangle of vines and ripped screen. He darted into the bathroom, sat with his back against the toilet bowl, and braced the door shut with his feet.

The sound of the jaguar's struggles subsided, and for a moment he thought it had given up. Sweat left cold trails down his sides, his heart pounded. He held his breath, listening, and it seemed the whole world was holding its breath as well. The noises of wind and surf and insects were a faint seething; moonlight shed a sickly white radiance through the enlaced vines overhead, and a chameleon was frozen among peels of wallpaper beside the door. He let out a sigh and wiped the sweat from his eyes. He swallowed.

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Then the top panel of the door exploded, shattered by a black paw. Splinters of rotten wood flew into his face, and he screamed. The sleek wedge of the jaguar's head thrust through the hole, roaring. A gateway of gleaming fangs guarding a plush red throat. Half-paralyzed, Esteban jabbed weakly with the machete. The jaguar withdrew, reached in with its paw, and clawed at his leg. More by accident than design, he managed to slice the jaguar, and the paw, too, was withdrawn. He heard it rumbling in the front room, and then, seconds later, a heavy thump against the wall behind him. The jaguar's head appeared above the edge of the wall; it was hanging by its forepaws, trying to gain a perch from which to leap down into the room. Esteban scrambled to his feet and slashed wildly, severing vines. The jaguar fell back, yowling. For a while it prowled along the wall, fuming to itself. Finally there was silence.

When sunlight began to filter through the vines, Esteban walked out of the house and headed down the beach to Puerto Morada. He went with his head lowered, desolate, thinking of the grim future that awaited him after he returned the money to Onofrio: a life of trying to please an increasingly shrewish Incarnación, of killing lesser jaguars for much less money. He was so mired in depression that he did not notice the woman until she called to him. She was leaning against a palm about thirty feet away, wearing a filmy white dress through which he could see the dark jut of her nipples. He drew his machete and backed off a pace.

"Why do you fear me, Esteban?" she called, walking toward him.

"You tricked me into revealing my method and tried to kill me," he said. "Is that not reason for fear?"

"I did not know you or your method in that form. I knew only that you were hunting me. But now the hunt has ended, and we can be as man and woman."

He kept his machete at point. "What are you?" he asked.

She smiled. "My name is Miranda. I am Patuca."

"Patucas do not have black fur and fangs."

"I am of the Old Patuca," she said. "We have this power."

"Keep away!" He lifted the machete as if to strike, and she stopped just beyond his reach.

"You can kill me if that is your wish, Esteban." She spread her arms, and her breasts thrust forward against the fabric of her dress. "You are stronger than I, now. But listen to me first."

He did not lower the machete, but his fear and anger were being overridden by a sweeter emotion.

"Long ago," she said, "there was a great healer who foresaw that one day the Patuca would lose their place in the world, and so, with the help of

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the gods, he opened a door into another world where the tribe could flourish. But many of the tribe were afraid and would not follow him. Since then, the door has been left open for those who would come after." She waved at the ruined houses. "Barrio Carolina is the site of the door, and the jaguar is its guardian. But soon the fevers of this world will sweep over the barrio, and the door will close forever. For though our hunt has ended, there is no end to hunters or to greed." She came a step nearer. "If you listen to the sounding of your heart, you will know this is the truth."

He half-believed her, yet he also believed her words masked a more poignant truth, one that fitted inside the other the way his machete fitted into its sheath.

"What is it?" she asked. "What troubles you?"

"I think you have come to prepare me for death," he said, "and that your door leads only to death."

"Then why do you not run from me?" She pointed toward Puerto Morada. "That is death, Esteban. The cries of the gulls are death, and when the hearts of lovers stop at the moment of greatest pleasure, that, too, is death. This world is no more than a thin covering of life drawn over a foundation of death, like a scum of algae upon a rock. Perhaps you are right, perhaps my world lies beyond death. The two ideas are not opposed. But if I am death to you, Esteban, then it is death you love."

He turned his eyes to the sea, not wanting her to see his face. "I do not love you," he said.

"Love awaits us," she said. "And someday you will join me in my world."

He looked back to her, ready with a denial, but was shocked to silence. Her dress had fallen to the sand, and she was smiling. The litheness and purity of the jaguar were reflected in every line of her body; her secret hair was so absolute a black that it seemed an absence in her flesh. She moved close, pushing aside the machete. The tips of her breasts brushed against him, warm through the coarse cloth of his shirt; her hands cupped his face, and he was drowning in her heated scent, weakened by both fear and desire.

"We are of one soul, you and I," she said. "One blood and one truth. You cannot reject me."

Days passed, though Esteban was unclear as to how many. Night and day were unimportant incidences of his relationship with Miranda, serving only to color their lovemaking with a spectral or a sunny mood; and each time they made love, it was as if a thousand new colors were being added to his senses. He had never been so content. Sometimes, gazing at the haunted facades of the barrio, he believed that they might well con-

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ceal shadowy avenues leading to another world; however, whenever Miranda tried to convince him to leave with her, he refused: he could not overcome his fear and would never admit — even to himself — that he loved her. He attempted to fix his thoughts on Incarnación, hoping this would undermine his fixation with Miranda and free him to return to Puerto Morada; but he found that he could not picture his wife except as a black bird hunched before a flickering gray jewel. Miranda, however, seemed equally unreal at times. Once as they sat on the bank of the Rio Dulce, watching the reflection of the moon — almost full — floating upon the water, she pointed to it and said, "My world is that near, Esteban. That touchable. You may think the moon above is real and this is only a reflection, but the thing most real, that most illustrates the real, is the surface that permits the illusion of reflection. Passing through this surface is what you fear, and yet it is so insubstantial, you would scarcely notice the passage."

"You sound like the old priest who taught me philosophy," said Esteban. "His world — his heaven — was also philosophy. Is that what your world is? The idea of a place? Or are there birds and jungles and rivers?"

Her expression was in partial eclipse, half-moonlit, half-shadowed, and her voice revealed nothing of her mood. "No more than there are here," she said.

"What does that mean?" he said angrily. "Why will you not give me a clear answer?"

"If I were to describe my world, you would simply think me a clever liar." She rested her head on his shoulder. "Sooner or later you will understand. We did not find each other merely to have the pain of being parted."

In that moment her beauty — like her words — seemed a kind of evasion, obscuring a dark and frightening beauty beneath; and yet he knew that she was right, that no proof of hers could persuade him contrary to his fear.

One afternoon, an afternoon of such brightness that it was impossible to look at the sea without squinting, they swam out to a sandbar that showed as a thin curving island of white against the green water. Esteban floundered and splashed, but Miranda swam as if born to the element; she darted beneath him, tickling him, pulling at his feet, eeling away before he could catch her. They walked along the sand, turning over starfish with their toes, collecting whelks to boil for their dinner, and then Esteban spotted a dark stain hundreds of yards wide that was moving below the water beyond the bar: a great school of king mackerel.

"It is too bad we have no boat," he said. "Mackerel would taste better than whelks."

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"We need no boat," she said. "I will show you an old way of catching fish."

She traced a complicated design in the sand, and when she had done, she led him into the shallows and had him stand facing her a few feet away.

"Look down at the water between us," she said. "Do not look up, and keep perfectly still until I tell you."

She began to sing with a faltering rhythm, a rhythm that put him in mind of the ragged breezes of the season. Most of the words were unfamiliar, but others he recognized as Patuca. After a minute he experienced a wave of dizziness, as if his legs had grown long and spindly, and he was now looking down from a great height, breathing rarefied air. Then a tiny dark stain materialized below the expanse of water between him and Miranda. He remembered his grandfather's stories of the Old Patuca, how — with the help of the gods — they had been able to shrink the world, to bring enemies close and cross vast distances in a matter of moments. But the gods were dead, their powers gone from the world. He wanted to glance back to shore and see if he and Miranda had become coppery giants taller than the palms.

"Now," she said, breaking off her song, "you must put your hand into the water on the seaward side of the school and gently wiggle your fingers. Very gently! Be sure not to disturb the surface."

But when Esteban made to do as he was told, he slipped and caused a splash. Miranda cried out. Looking up, he saw a wall of jade-green water bearing down on them, its face thickly studded with the fleeting dark shapes of the mackerel. Before he could move, the wave swept over the sandbar and carried him under, dragging him along the bottom and finally casting him onto shore. The beach was littered with flopping mackerel; Miranda lay in the shallows, laughing at him. Esteban laughed, too, but only to cover up his rekindled fear of this woman who drew upon the powers of dead gods. He had no wish to hear her explanation; he was certain she would tell him that the gods lived on in her world, and this would only confuse him further.

Later that day as Esteban was cleaning the fish, while Miranda was off picking bananas to cook with them — the sweet little ones that grew along the riverbank — a Land-Rover came jouncing up the beach from Puerto Morada, an orange fire of the setting sun dancing on its windshield. It pulled up beside him, and Onofrio climbed out the passenger side. A hectic flush dappled his cheeks, and he was dabbing his sweaty brow with a handkerchief. Raimundo climbed out the driver's side and leaned against the door, staring hatefully at Esteban.

"Nine days and not a word," said Onofrio gruffly. "We thought you were dead. How goes the hunt?"

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Esteban set down the fish he had been scaling and stood. "I have failed," he said. "I will give you back the money."

Raimundo chuckled — a dull, cluttered sound — and Onofrio grunted with amusement. "Impossible," he said. "Incarnación has spent the money on a house in Barrio Clarín. You must kill the jaguar."

"I cannot," said Esteban. "I will repay you, somehow."

"The Indian has lost his nerve, Father." Raimundo spat in the sand. "Let my friends and I hunt the jaguar."

The idea of Raimundo and his loutish friends thrashing through the jungle was so ludicrous that Esteban could not restrain a laugh.

"Be careful, Indian!" Raimundo banged the flat of his hand on the roof of the car.

"It is you who should be careful," said Esteban. "Most likely the jaguar will be hunting you." Esteban picked up his machete. "And whoever hunts this jaguar will answer to me as well."

Raimundo reached for something in the driver's seat and walked around in front of the hood. In his hand was a silvered automatic. "I await your answer." he said.

"Put that away!" Onofrio's tone was that of a man addressing a child whose menace was inconsequential, but the intent surfacing in Raimundo's face was not childish. A tic marred the plump curve of his cheek, the ligature of his neck was cabled, and his lips were drawn back in a joyless grin. It was, thought Esteban — strangely fascinated by the transformation — like watching a demon dissolve its false shape: the true lean features melting up from the illusion of the soft.

"This son of a whore insulted me in front of Julia!" Raimundo's gun hand was shaking.

"Your personal differences can wait," said Onofrio. "This is a business matter." He held out his hand. "Give me the gun."

"If he is not going to kill the jaguar, what use is he?" said Raimundo.

"Perhaps we can convince him to change his mind." Onofrio beamed at Esteban. "What do you say? Shall I let my son collect his debt of honor, or will you fulfill our contract?"

"Father!" complained Raimundo; his eyes flicked sideways. "He . . ."

Esteban broke for the jungle. The gun roared, a white-hot claw swiped at his side, and he went flying. For an instant he did not know where he was; but then, one by one, his impressions began to sort themselves. He was lying on his injured side, and it was throbbing fiercely. Sand crusted his mouth and eyelids. He was curled up around his machete, which was still clutched in his hand. Voices above him, sand fleas hopping on his face. He resisted the urge to brush them off and lay without moving. The throb of his wound and his hatred had the same red force behind them.

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". . . carry him to the river," Raimundo was saying, his voice atremble with excitement. "Everyone will think the jaguar killed him!"

"Fool!" said Onofrio. "He might have killed the jaguar, and you could have had a sweeter revenge. His wife..."

"This was sweet enough," said Raimundo.

A shadow fell over Esteban, and he held his breath. He needed no herbs to deceive this pale, flabby jaguar who was bending to him, turning him onto his back.

"Watch out!" cried Onofrio.

Esteban let himself be turned and lashed out with the machete. His contempt for Onofrio and Incarnación, as well as his hatred of Raimundo, was involved in the blow, and the blade lodged deep in Raimundo's side, grating on bone. Raimundo shrieked and would have fallen, but the blade helped to keep him upright; his hands fluttered around the machete as if he wanted to adjust it to a more comfortable position, and his eyes were wide with disbelief. A shudder vibrated the hilt of the machete — it seemed sensual, the spasm of a spent passion —and Raimundo sank to his knees. Blood spilled from his mouth, adding tragic lines to the corners of his lips. He pitched forward, not falling flat but remaining kneeling, his face pressed into the sand: the attitude of an Arab at prayer.

Esteban wrenched the machete free, fearful of an attack by Onofrio, but the appliance dealer was squirming into the Land-Rover. The engine caught, the wheels spun, and the car lurched off, turning through the edge of the surf and heading for Puerto Morada. An orange dazzle flared on the rear window, as if the spirit who had lured it to the barrio was now harrying it away.

Unsteadily, Esteban got to his feet. He peeled his shirt back from the bullet wound. There was a lot of blood, but it was only a crease. He avoided looking at Raimundo and walked down to the water and stood gazing out at the waves; his thoughts rolled in with them, less thoughts than tidal sweeps of emotion.

It was twilight by the time Miranda returned, her arms full of bananas and wild figs. She had not heard the shot. He told her what had happened as she dressed his wounds with a poultice of herbs and banana leaves. "It will mend," she said of the wound. "But this" — she gestured at Raimundo — "this will not. You must come with me, Esteban. The soldiers will kill you."

"No," he said. "They will come, but they are Patuca . . . except for the captain, who is a drunkard, a shell of a man. I doubt he will even be notified. They will listen to my story, and we will reach an accommodation. No matter what lies Onofrio tells, his word will not stand against theirs."

"And then?"

"I may have to go to jail for a while, or I may have to leave the pro-

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vince. But I will not be killed."

She sat for a minute without speaking, the whites of her eyes glowing in the half-light. Finally she stood and walked off along the beach.

"Where are you going?" he called.

She turned back. "You speak so casually of losing me . . ." she began.

"It is not casual!"

"No!" She laughed bitterly. "I suppose not. You are so afraid of life, you call it death and would prefer jail or exile to living it. That is hardly casual." She stared at him, her expression a cypher at that distance. "I will not lose you, Esteban," she said. She walked away again, and this time when he called she did not turn.

Twilight deepened to dusk, a slow fill of shadow graying the world into negative, and Esteban felt himself graying along with it, his thoughts reduced to echoing the dull wash of the receding tide. The dusk lingered, and he had the idea that night would never fall, that the act of violence had driven a nail through the substance of his irresolute life, pinned him forever to this ashen moment and deserted shore. As a child he had been terrified by the possibility of such magical isolations, but now the prospect seemed a consolation for Miranda's absence, a remembrance of her magic. Despite her parting words, he did not think she would be back — there had been sadness and finality in her voice — and this roused in him feelings of both relief and desolation, feelings that set him to pacing up and down the tidal margin of the shore.

The full moon rose, the sands of the barrio burned silver, and shortly thereafter four soldiers came in a jeep from Puerto Morada. They were gnomish, copper-skinned men, and their uniforms were the dark blue of the night sky, bearing no device or decoration. Though they were not close friends, he knew them each by name. Sebastian, Amador, Carlito, and Ramón. In their headlights Raimundo's corpse — startlingly pale, the blood on his face dried into intricate whorls — looked like an exotic creature cast up by the sea, and their inspection of it smacked more of curiosity than of a search for evidence. Amador unearthed Raimundo's gun, sighted along it toward the jungle, and asked Ramón how much he thought it was worth.

"Perhaps Onofrio will give you a good price," said Ramón, and the others laughed.

They built a fire of driftwood and coconut shells, and sat around it while Esteban told his story; he did not mention either Miranda or her relation to the jaguar, because these men — estranged from the tribe by their government service — had grown conservative in their judgments, and he did not want them to consider him irrational. They listened without comment; the firelight burnished their

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skins to reddish gold and glinted on their rifle barrels.

"Onofrio will take his charge to the capital if we do nothing," said Amador after Esteban had finished.

"He may in any case," said Carlito. "And then it will go hard with Esteban."

"And," said Sebastian, "if an agent is sent to Puerto Morada and sees how things are with Captain Portales, they will surely replace him and it will go hard with us."

They stared into the flames, mulling over the problem, and Esteban chose the moment to ask Amador, who lived near him on the mountain, if he had seen Incarnación.

"She will be amazed to learn you are alive," said Amador. "I saw her yesterday in the dressmaker's shop. She was admiring the fit of a new black skirt in the mirror."

It was as if a black swath of Incarnación's skirt had folded around Esteban's thoughts. He lowered his head and carved lines in the sand with the point of his machete.

"I have it," said Ramón. "A boycott!"

The others expressed confusion.

"If we do not buy from Onofrio, who will?" said Ramón. "He will lose his business. Threatened with this, he will not dare involve the government. He will allow Esteban to plead self-defense."

"But Raimundo was his only son," said Amador. "It may be that grief will count more than greed in this instance."

Again they fell silent. It mattered little to Esteban what was decided. He was coming to understand that without Miranda, his future held nothing but uninteresting choices; he turned his gaze to the sky and noticed that the stars and the fire were flickering with the same rhythm, and he imagined each of them ringed by a group of gnomish, copper-skinned men, debating the question of his fate.

"Aha!" said Carlito. "I know what to do. We will occupy Barrio Carolina — the entire company — and *we* will kill the jaguar. Onofrio's greed cannot withstand this temptation."

"That you must not do," said Esteban.

"But why?" asked Amador. "We may not kill the jaguar, but with so many men we will certainly drive it away."

Before Esteban could answer, the jaguar roared. It was prowling down the beach toward the fire, like a black flame itself shifting over the glowing sand. Its ears were laid back, and silver drops of moonlight gleamed in its eyes. Amador grabbed his rifle, came to one knee, and fired: the bullet sprayed sand a dozen feet to the left of the jaguar.

"Wait!" cried Esteban, pushing him down.

But the rest had begun to fire, and the jaguar was hit. It leaped high as it

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had that first night while playing, but this time it landed in a heap, snarling, snapping at its shoulder; it regained its feet and limped toward the jungle, favoring its right foreleg. Excited by their success, the soldiers ran a few paces after it and stopped to fire again. Carlito dropped to one knee, taking careful aim.

"No!" shouted Esteban, and as he hurled his machete at Carlito, desperate to prevent further harm to Miranda, he recognized the trap that had been sprung and the consequences he would face.

The blade sliced across Carlito's thigh, knocking him onto his side. He screamed, and Amador, seeing what had happened, fired wildly at Esteban and called to the others. Esteban ran toward the jungle, making for the jaguar's path. A fusilade of shots rang out behind him, bullets whipped past his ears. Each time his feet slipped in the soft sand, the moonstruck facades of the barrio appeared to lurch sideways as if trying to block his way. And then, as he reached the verge of the jungle, he was hit.

The bullet seemed to throw him forward, to increase his speed, but somehow he managed to keep his feet. He careened along the path, arms waving, breath shrieking in his throat. Palmetto fronds swatted his face, vines tangled his legs. He felt no pain, only a peculiar numbness that pulsed low in his back; he pictured the wound opening and closing like the mouth of an anemone. The soldiers were shouting his name. They would follow, but cautiously, afraid of the jaguar, and he thought he might be able to cross the river before they could catch up. But when he came to the river, he found the jaguar waiting.

It was crouched on the tussocky rise, its neck craned over the water, and below, half a dozen feet from the bank, floated the reflection of the full moon, huge and silvery, an unblemished circle of light. Blood glistened scarlet on the jaguar's shoulder, like a fresh rose pinned in place, and this made it look even more an embodiment of principle: the shape a god might choose, that some universal constant might assume. It gazed calmly at Esteban, growled low in its throat, and dove into the river, cleaving and shattering the moon's reflection, vanishing beneath the surface. The ripples subsided, the image of the moon reformed. And there, silhouetted against it, Esteban saw the figure of a woman swimming, each stroke causing her to grow smaller and smaller until she seemed no more than a character incised upon a silver plate. It was not only Miranda he saw, but all mystery and beauty receding from him, and he realized how blind he had been not to perceive the truth sheathed inside the truth of death that had been sheathed inside her truth of another world. It was clear to him now. It sang to him from his wound, every syllable a heartbeat. It

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was written by the dying ripples, it swayed in the banana leaves, it sighed on the wind. It was everywhere, and he had always known it: If you deny mystery — even in the guise of death — then you deny life, and you will walk like a ghost through your days, never knowing the secrets of the extremes. The deep sorrows, the absolute joys.

He drew a breath of the rank jungle air, and with it drew a breath of a world no longer his, of the girl Incarnación, of friends and children and country nights . . . all his lost sweetness. His chest tightened as with the onset of tears, but the sensation quickly abated, and he understood that the sweetness of the past had been subsumed by a scent of mangoes, that nine magical days — a magical number of days, the number it takes to sing the soul to rest — lay between him and tears. Freed of those associations, he felt as if he were undergoing a subtle refinement of form, a winnowing, and he remembered having felt much the same on the day when he had run out the door of Santa María del Onda, putting behind him its dark geometries and cobwebbed catechisms and generations of swallows that had never flown beyond the walls, casting off his acolyte's robe and racing across the square toward the mountain and Incarnación: it had been she

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who had lured him then, just as his mother had lured him to the church and as Miranda was luring him now, and he laughed at seeing how easily these three women had diverted the flow of his life, how like other men he was in this.

The strange bloom of painlessness in his back was sending out tendrils into his arms and legs, and the cries of the soldiers had grown louder. Miranda was a tiny speck shrinking against a silver immensity. For a moment he hesitated, experiencing a resurgence of fear; then Miranda's face materialized in his mind's eye, and all the emotion he had suppressed for nine days poured through him, washing away the fear. It was a silvery, flawless emotion, and he was giddy with it, light with it; it was like thunder and fire fused into one element and boiling up inside him, and he was overwhelmed by a need to express it, to mold it into a form that would reflect its power and purity. But he was no singer, no poet. There was but a single mode of expression open to him. Hoping he was not too late, that Miranda's door had not shut forever, Esteban dove into the river, cleaving the image of the full moon; and — his eyes still closed from the shock of the splash — with the last of his mortal strength, he swam hard down after her.

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The planners of the paradise in space went heavy on doves, lambs and the like. There was only one problem . . .

Rats in Space

BY
JACK C. HALDEMAN II

I don't mind the cockroaches. It's the rats that drive me crazy.

The roaches live behind the main thruster control panel. They come out only when it's dark. I have no problem with the roaches. But when a rat floats past my face in zero-g with its ugly bald tail twitching and its little feet just churning away, well, that's when I figure they don't pay me enough.

I used to have a glamorous job, flying the suborbital for Pan American. The New York-to-Sydney jump. Just me and the stews moving passengers back and forth from the Big Apple to Down Under. Three days on and five days off. A piece of cake. I got to wear a fancy uniform, and everybody called me "sir." Now I talk to the ants to keep from going crazy. They got into the pantry this trip. It's a real mess.

Pan Am and I had a dispute of sorts. I wanted more pay and fewer hours. They offered less pay and more hours. I started checking the ads.

A company was looking for pilots to the O'Neills. The pay was good, and I wouldn't have to put up with any more drunks. There's nothing worse than a drunk sticking his head into the control room when you're trying to calculate the glide into Sydney while dodging the 8:15 Delta flight. The suborbital is like a big elevator ride, and when a drunk looks in and sees the horizon dropping away through the forward bubble, he's likely to toss his cookies. Happened more than once. Nothing worse. Except maybe the rats. Yeah, probably the rats, now that I think about it. Especially rats.

The O'Neills are beautiful. They hang up there between Earth and the

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moon like the best that man can be. I can't believe we kept it together long enough to build them, but we did, and there they are. Six gleaming space colonies holding an uncrowded ten thousand people.

Some guy thought up the idea for them long before I was born, and some other people got together and built them. They shot materials up from the moon and put it all together in space. They're great-looking, really; like an engineering marvel or something.

The group that put up the O'Neills had lots of grand plans and the money to put them into operation. It was the perfect opportunity for a fresh start for mankind. They were going to do it over, but this time they were going right. They envisioned six little paradises. They built them.

They were designed on a huge scale, with plenty of room for everyone. There are quiet places where a person can go to get away from things, and meeting places for those who like groups. The forests and parks they built are balanced by city areas and farms.

The O'Neills were built to be self-sufficient and self-contained. Once they got going they didn't need anything important from Earth. Plants pull out the excess carbon dioxide and give off oxygen while they are busy making themselves good to eat. Wastes are recycled. It's a closed system; everything gets used over and over again. Any manufacturing they do takes place in globes that float around the O'Neills. The raw materials come from the moon, thrown into place by mass drivers that hardly use any energy at all.

Energy on the O'Neills is all solar and free for the taking. The atmosphere is better than Earth's has ever been. No smog, no smokestacks, nothing that shouldn't be there.

That's the point. They didn't want to build more little Earths. They wanted to build what Earth could have been if we hadn't messed it up.

It was a great idea.

They planned it carefully from the beginning. Everything that went up had to pass the screening board. Everything. The committee had eleven members. Mostly their job was pretty easy. They wanted the best.

They listened to what the plant geneticists had to say and picked only the finest crops. The crops had great yields, and the plants bred true. There were no pests to cut down production, no droughts, no cloudy days. Everything was perfect. Since there were no seasons, they grew crops year-round and had a harvest easily four hundred times what a typical dirt-scratching Earthside farmer would have. The plants were easy to choose. Of course they didn't ship up any weeds.

It was the same with animals, both pets and meat-producing animals. Only the best were chosen. It was

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simple with the produce, only a matter of protein and economics. The pets were another matter. There were aesthetics involved, and committees have never been very good at that. In the end it was decided that a limited number of specific types of cats and dogs would be allowed and their reproductive tendencies carefully controlled. This caused some trouble with parakeet fans and those who were fond of tropical fish, so certain exceptions were allowed. No snakes, though. Snakes were out.

Actually, the committee didn't do badly when it came to making allowances for aesthetic considerations. They realized that even in space, people needed pretty things around them. The committee was big on hummingbirds because they helped the plants while they flew around being delicate and graceful. Most people liked robins, so they shipped some of them up. Doves were nice, and they were symbolic, too. Ladybugs and earthworms got the nod because they were good for the crops. Bees pollinated flowers, and the honey was a fine byproduct. Cardinals were such a pretty red it wouldn't do to leave them behind. Lambs were nice, and the people liked to see the sheep grazing in the parks. No one spoke up for wolves, and fruit flies were definitely on nobody's list.

So they got paradise, and I got a job flying up there once a week. It sounded great when I signed on the dotted line. I could lay over on Earth, or I could wait between flights on one of the O'Neills if I wanted to. I figured it would be like one long vacation. A piece of paradise sounded fine to me.

So look what happened. Here I am stuck in a tin can, and I don't even get a fancy uniform to wear. My passengers leave a lot to be desired. No stewardesses. I'm not sure I care much for the O'Neills anymore, either.

My communications light flashed green. I brushed away a spider and hit the toggle.

"Shuttle One," I said. "Go ahead, O'Neill Five."

"That you, Frank? We thought you'd never get here."

"Easy," I said. "I'm right on schedule."

"Snakes. Did you bring any snakes this time? Maybe some hawks? We're up to our ears in cardinals and robins. They're driving us crazy. We've got to do something."

"A few snakes, but no hawks, sorry. But I have some nice dung beetles for you."

"Great. The doves are getting out of hand. You should see what they're doing to the park benches."

I shuddered. It didn't take much imagination for me to visualize the mess. Droppings everywhere. Dung beetles wouldn't be enough. They'd need cockroaches.

They'd built paradise, but they'd also built a system without checks

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and balances. Everything was beautiful, but there was too much of it. They could neuter the pets, but there wasn't much they could do about the hummingbirds. Without any natural enemies to hold their population down, there were millions of them. You couldn't go outside without having to brush them off your clothes.

One cardinal is beautiful. Five of them outside your window is kind of a pleasant thing to watch. But what about fifty? A thousand? Ten thousand? Pretty soon they get to be a royal pain. It had passed that stage in the O'Neills a long time ago. Doves dive-bomb you in the streets; lambs hide behind every corner, waiting to nibble at your ankles. Roses and marigolds are taking over everything. Ladybugs get stuck in your hair. Bees sting your arms and legs. You never know when a hummingbird will stick its beak in your ear.

So that's my job. I provide the checks and I provide the balances. I ferry up all the stuff they thought they didn't want. I've got flies and centipedes and all kinds of bugs and spiders. I've got mice and moles. I've even got buzzards.

What I don't have is a nice uniform and a glamorous job. Nobody calls me "sir" anymore. There're no drunk passengers on board, but I think I've got fleas, and they weren't even on the manifest.

A rat floats in front of my nose and stares at me with his beady eyes. I miss the stewardesses.

Sometimes I even miss the drunks.

ANSWER TO APRIL ACROSTIC

Quotation: The wind was dying in his head. He heard the man's angry words. "Jesus Christ," he said, looking at the picture of John Lee sitting in the chair. He took a knife from his pocket and slashed through the canvas. "Stop it!" John Lee croaked and took an unsteady step in the man's direction.
Author and work: Tom Reamy, "San Diego Lightfoot Sue".

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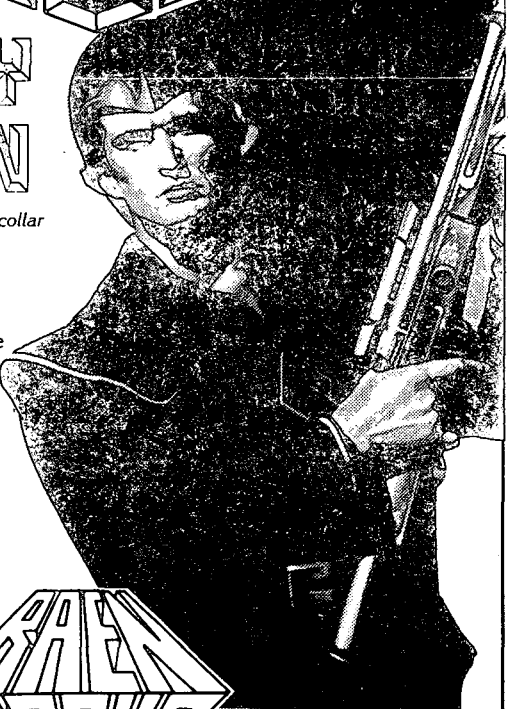

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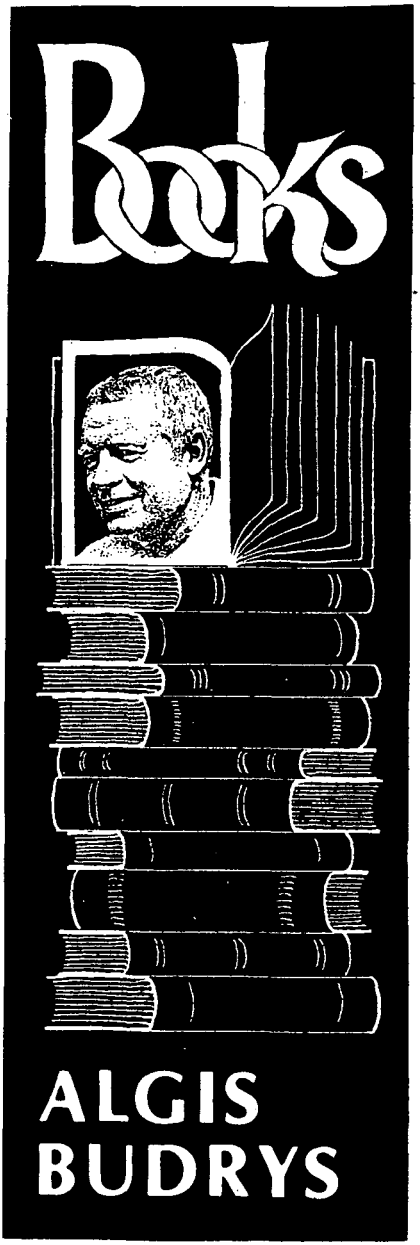

Lifeburst, Jack Williamson, Del Rey, $12.95

The Faces of Science Fiction, Patti Perret, Bluejay, $11.95

The Other Time, Mack Reynolds/Dean Ing, Baen Books, $2.95

BROWSERS' CORNER:
Arslan, M.J. Engh, Warner Book 86-104, $1.25 (1976)

There are some basic things science fiction must evoke if it is going to persist as a viable form within the realm of speculative fiction. For instance, there is no use for it if it doesn't convey a sense for humanity's place within the scheme of the stars, and simultaneously for the glory inherent in an organism perceiving the stars and wondering at their scheme.

This is a delicate business, however. There are technical problems in communicating the scale of things within which humanity exists. When we attempt to measure space and time, we must use numbers with many zeroes in them. Zeroes are read as nullity, and many of our writers seem unaware that an attempt to make the journey to Andromeda seem vast by packing it with zero-equivalents will result, instead, in a sense that the thing is about the size of a basketball and floating off just beyond Hoboken. What it takes to quantify the Universe in any meaningful fashion is poetry. Like so:

In Jack Williamson's *Lifeburst,* Earth is girdled at the Equator by a

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beadwork fan of tethered satellites. Far beyond the Sun's planets, out in the Oort Cloud whence the comets come, a human outpost is in the initial stages of contact with an interstellar multispecies culture of great age, lofty not to say jaded purview, and considerable reluctance to close with us. And somewhere in the stars is the ancient source of the Seeker queens — relentless apolitical metal-eating self-reproducing spacefaring quasi-intelligent insectile weapon-organisms ten times the size of a spaceship, forged by a vanished people in a forgotten war. Having first destroyed their creators, the seekers have become a terrible infestation; nothing can stop them, and only the sheer size of the galaxy buffers their proliferation. A pregnant one now burrows into a nickel-iron asteroid in our solar system.

That puts it all there ... Universe as cathedral, humanity as mouse, yet humanity as industrious, aspiring mouse capable of perceiving the great arching vaults and the luminescent perspectives; Seeker queen as the personification of the thousand natural shocks; galactic culture as hostel in the skirting-board. Late Arthur C. Clarke and young Gregory Benford come to mind. Mind you, Jack Williamson appeared in professional SF eighteen years ahead of Clarke, thirty-seven years ahead of Benford. You might expect him not to be quite as quick on his feet as those kids, and as late as 1964, with a roughly similar idea in *The Reefs of Space* (done as a collaboration with Frederik Pohl) the evidence would have been on your side. But twenty years have passed, and the old man is improving with practice.

Imposed on the simple Clarkeian starscape, and enveloping the Benfordish (and Saberhagenoid) Seeker queen, is an uncompromising *real-politikal* subplot based on a cleareyed view of Terrestrial mercantilism, beginning with

> In flight from the Cheka, or so he says, "Ivan Ivanoff" reaches Hong Kong on a forged Portuguese passport. A wiry little man with a strong nose and a spent pistol bullet lodged in the socket of his blind right eye, he speaks seven languages, all of them loudly but badly, Russian no better than the rest. He carries diamonds he says are Czarist sewed into the lining of his astrakhan cap. Confounding foes with a wild eloquence and a one-eyed leer, he recovers his health and takes the name of his Eurasian mistress. As Ivan Kwan, he sets out to regain the imperial station he claims the Bolsheviks have raped away.

(Which he does — the satellite beadwork belongs to the proliferated Kwan-Romanoff descendants, as do the bloody-minded management policies and the nepotic convolutions that soon beset the new Empire.)

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I see that opening crescendo as propulsive prose, clean, dramatic, multivalent, modern. I see that — and subsequent passages like it, and the scenes and plot-turns developed from it — as evidence for a first-rate mind seasoned over the years, housing interior observations which only by convention were so long expressed in the variously stilted (and then equally modern) vocabularies of *The Legion of Space, The Crucible of Power, Seetee Shock* or even the relatively modern robot stories now called *The Humanoids.*

What I am definitely saying is that making allowance for natural ups and downs over a career initiated in 1928 — at the age of 20 — Williamson has steadily gotten better; more, that he was apparently always ready to be as good as he thought the field would let him be at any given time. (The Sun Company plotline in *Lifeburst,* intriguingly, can be seen both as a serious realistic proposition and, consequently, as a reproach against the then-fashionable "comic inferno" caricature-society in *Reefs of Space.*)

I find all this fascinating, and indicative. Enigmatically indicative. In this book, there is also what might be called a superplot; the story of Quin the boy in the Oort Cloud station, over the years as he grows into manhood and is not of Earth or the Sun Company, though he longs to be, and in the end proves to be the first human Galactic.

Quin is an almost conventional Williamsonian hero; often the man who just wants to sit down in a quiet corner and draw unencumbered breath, but whose innocent needs and unexceptionable wants unfortunately intersect and obstruct the firing lines between contending powers. We have seen him before, many times, and though Williamson has gotten good at him, he is a curiously old-fashioned intrusion on a "new" Williamson. There are signs this book was drafted in some haste. Most SF books are, even now. I think Quin is there because Williamson wanted to get his complex vision into print quickly, needed some mortar for the groins and mullions, and reached into the bag for Quin. And the result is an old-fashioned character in a new-fashioned story; effective enough, satisfactory surely, and not, mind you, an old-fashioned character in an old-fashioned story.

There's the thing, you see. The clear visibility of the fault in this book is a fault of progress. The ambition of this book is second to none, the resources of its author not only impress, they impress retroactively, validating the long-held but not often substantiated assertion that we contain seminalities we haven't even used yet, and have always contained them.

The Faces of Science Fiction is a photo book, sort of 8″ x 10″, depicting SF writers as found by Patti Perret, a

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freelance with little previous acquaintance of our field. The face on the cover is the face of Jack Williamson, and behind it, with an introduction by Gene Wolfe and some prefactory matter by Perret and her husband, Mark Bingham, are the lineaments of 81 other SF writers in the U.S.A. They range across all the generations and modes, beginning with Forrest Ackerman, Robert Adams and Poul Anderson, on through Wolfe, Wollheim, and Zelazny. I am in there, too, (rebuilding a Campagnolo front brake caliper, in case you're wondering what the hell I'm doing with my hands in that position). I think my picture looks like me on a good day, and so I am pleased. I took the book along to a convention and to a party at Gene Wolfe's house, and everybody had to drop what they were doing and leaf through it.

The book was done by Perret and Bingham's driving 24,000 miles from house to house, and if my own experience is any guide, hours were spent and many feet of 35mm film were exposed in each case. When I look at the faces of those I know, I see them as they are, not as they are commonly photographed, and so I believe that if you want to know what we really look like, here's your best shot. Each of us also contributes some few words, and some are effective, but you want to remember that our words are our shield and we do not disarm readily, whereas our faces are unaccustomed to much scrutiny.

This is one of those books that occurs because none of the people concerned — not Perret, not Elsie Wollheim who started it up, not Bluejay's Jim Frenkel who decided to publish it after Perret came to photograph his wife, Joan Vinge — were smart enough to realize what a foolish thing this project was. Consequently, a hundred years hence this book will be a core resource; happily, it's put together now in a way that reflects pride and care.

Paradoxically, I am now untroubled by its lack of any sort of index and its other failure of system, which is that we're also not in there alphabetically. I thought about that. But that is how we are found ... one by one, along your random path, take us as we are.

The late "Mack Reynolds" was a writer whose ideas habitually outstripped his skills. He was also possessed of the sort of intelligence that takes in enormous amounts of data, synthesizes all sorts of fascinating concepts out of that, but assigns few priorities of probability among them. Putting it another way, he had more engine than steering wheel.

This is not a sin per se in the SF world. It is all "a literature of ideas," some of us are incessantly fond of saying, and, as if to confirm that, any observer can readily detect that it is certainly not a literature of execution. But just as there is not much

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active opposition to prose skill should any be displayed, and not all SF publishers are adamantly against first-rate ideas deftly dealt with, so there are styles of idea.

There is probably where Reynolds — honest workman, clear-eyed observer, ready advocate of what he saw as fair and Devil take the hindmost — lost his chance for as much recognition as he deserved. For an idea to be impressive in this literature, it must first be a recognizable idea in a recognized context. Reynolds' net was cast too wide and perhaps too deep. He did novels about famine in Africa long before the fad famines, and about a cold war between two fully human opponents as distinguished from confrontations between Captain America and Colonel Godless. Nobody knew quite what to make of them, though some admired them.

Worse, he turned them out in large amounts, hitting and running between one target and the next dozen, so that instead of getting a reputation for being against something substantial, he gave off a faint aura of being against everything. Somewhere in there, he neglected to sufficiently underscore the fact that he was for common sense. It might not have helped if he had; first off, that's an unpopular cause, and, second, common sense is in the eye of the beholder.

Then he discovered he was going to die within a predictable time, and did a commonsense thing. He sat him down and wrote, wrote, wrote so as to create some sort of estate despite the medical bills, on the assumption that someone else could polish the first drafts and in any case there was enough of an SF book boom to carry a fair number of sales by a recognized byline, even if that name were not among the giants. He was right; Jim Baen bought the books, and Dean Ing, another honest workman, is bringing them up to a state acceptable to Baen.*

The central idea in *The Other Time* is not new: chap named Donald Fielding steps through a time warp, winds up at the court of Montezuma. Coincidentally fits the description of Quetzalcoatl, ancient white-eyed Promethean figure. All this has appeared in SF before. So has something much like what follows: Armed with 20th-century know-how and his fortunate resemblance, Fielding in effect becomes Quetzalcoatl, since he as an Anglo resembles him more closely than does the swarthy Hernando Cortez. What with all that, plus the cooperation of the enigmatic Malinche,

**Baen Books is what has replaced the Timescape imprint. Distributed by Pocket Books in effect, these are nevertheless different from Pocket Books SF titles. Baen's most recent previous situation was at Tor, and the Baen program closely resembles the Tor of some years past. It is in some ways a direct reply to the Del Rey program, though the two do not overlap exactly.*

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historically Cortez's leman but now Fielding's, the Aztecs run the Spanish out of the New World, and when last seen are on their way to fostering a civilized confederation of all Native American nations, and to hell with most of post-Columbian history as you and I know it.

Neat, engaging, not Earth-shaking as SF. Much the same could be said for it as a piece of prose fiction; it may be unkind, but not untrue, to suggest that Ing needs another draft. There are loose ends, and the pacing is notably poor, as if someone had told Ing on Thursday that he only had until next noon to turn it all in.

What is fun, and what I think many people read novels of this sort for, is Reynold's running commentary on conventional histories of the Aztec conquest. Acidly — and convincingly — longtime Mexican resident Reynolds picks apart Prescott's officially accepted *Conquest of Mexico*. He points out among other things that the concept of an Aztec "emperor" was imposed on a clan-governed culture by royalist invaders lacking any other concept of government; that Montezuma as we knew him from grade school is in effect a practical joke, though a sad one on the poor recipient of its benefits and on his people; that neither the social order nor the moral context were at all grasped by the Spanish even for purposes of overthrow, and ... by extension ... that this barbaric irresponsibility is exactly what made Cortez the winner in our improbable world, and arguably the only thing that could have let him over come what was rationally a ludicrously overwhelming foe.

SF in the greater sense, it is not; it is a history lesson in a clever palatable disguise. But we do a little of that, too, in our craft, and for what it is, here it is done engagingly well.

With this column, we begin an occasional feature, "Browser's Corner," which is a way of reviewing extraordinary books I have found on second-hand shelves and on the seats of abandoned cars. Hopefully, you will now go look for it on the "Any book here 25 Cents" table. The criterion is that the book has to justify the effort. M. J. Engh's *Arslan* does.

It's that very rare sort of animal, political science fiction, and it answers the question "What if the modern world fell under the sway of a new Tamerlane the Great?" Being a very good piece of political imagining, it thus also immediately becomes an anthropological one, and deals with the question "What are the essential cultural differences between an Asian and a middlewestern American?" From there, it proceeds to the sociological study of how a Eurasian occupying power would administer Kraftsville, Illinois, bearing in mind that the new town government begins from the baseline of a public celebratory hetero- and homosexual rape

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in the grammar school gymnasium. This is an event which none of the round-eyed participants can immediately see as essentially just an exercise in elucidating who's in charge and what is meant by that term. And from this inspired choice of the best sort of incident with which to begin, this book commences its extended study of what now happens to what we in the West call "The Human Situation," as if it were a real thing with ascertainable essentials, and which General Arslan I think could convincingly point out is not worth discussing.

All this, however, is told not in terms of sweeping historical perspective — which would make it readily accessible to persons who see world politics as a chess game — but through the eyes of the school principal and of the eighth grade boy whom Arslan first violates and then, over the subsequent years in which they are together, teaches. Teaches; what Franklin Bond, the principal, reacts to over the same span of years is the essentially instructional character of Arslan's regime — the blatant indivisibility of the guru from the conqueror. In this Arslan is exactly as Timur-i-leng or Timur's distant relative, Ghenghiz Khan, just two of the several Asian political geniuses who habitually signalled their institution of needed, effective and philosophically rooted social reforms by first erecting quite substantial pyramids of freshly flayed skulls obtained from among the beneficiaries.

No wonder nobody ever heard of this book; it actually gets into the Asian mind, actually understands what winds the springs within a compulsive conqueror, and delves profoundly into the shock on Western minds when all politesse is stripped away from interactions with him and whence he comes. It would be a totally incomprehensible book if its author were not deeply cultured and had not had the horse-sense to tell this story from the perspectives she chose.

The perspective is of the American small-town novel; one even thinks of *Penrod*. Franklin Bond is solid middle-American moderation, beautifully realized so that we see its strong component of respect for effective thinking; Arslan is Tamerlane to the life — an itinerant salesman; assertive, seductive, glamorous, never gone forever — and Hunt Morgan, the boy (who like the other young objects was selected not so much for his physical attractiveness as for his brightness) is the sort of youth who in the rural days might have ridden down to New Orleans on a raft and these days takes the Greyhound to Manhattan and a job in communications. His routine future torn away from him but his brightness stimulated by all the inputs thrust upon him by Arslan's worldwide resources, Hunt becomes the focus of a grapple be-

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tween Arslan and Bond, and then of an evolving sibling relationship with Arslan's natural son. Over the years in Kraftville, all this comes not so much to symbolize as to personify the things that contend for our souls so deeply that ordinary courage, love and honor are seen for the luxuries they are.

Clearly, *Arslan* is simply not a viable mass-market paperback property — the rape scenes are too few and told without titillation, the gunfire is usually over the horizon, and no glorious counter-revolution climaxes the book in a rattle of fifes and drums. This is a book to open the mind, not creep the flesh; it is intellectual in the sense that no one will ever market a video adventure game of it, for all that it's extremely difficult to put down for any length of time.

M. J. Engh — Mary Jane Engh, a soft-spoken unassertive person of, I would assume, north European ancestry — does not look as if she had all this sort of large and multiply articulated thing going on inside her. The book is dedicated to Fritz Leiber, "friend, heartener," and I assume from this she has been a student or apprentice of Fritz's. She still attends writing workshops, to which she submits quiet little short stories, which somehow do not properly display her amazing ear for significant dialogue, her eye for detail, or her feel for rhythmic, cadenced prose, all of which combine to produce an extraordinarily gifted impression when she is a novelist.

In all truth, there are parts of *Arslan* that seem opaque; the quiet understatement is occasionally overdone, the allusions to poetry and images from world literature outstrip this poor reader's sophistication. But, really, if M.J. possessed enough mercantilism to move around the right circles at the right conventions, if the editor sapient enough to buy this book for Warner's had been effective enough to get it a proper cover and blurbs — and a title with, for God's sake, a little more conveyance of what this book is about — and if its author had gotten some decent promotion, and — dare we say it — if M.J. were wise enough to be more lightweight in her choice of topics — she wouldn't be SF's best-kept secret first-rate talent.

NOTICES:

Last time, I told you the *Writers of The Future* anthology edited by Algis Budrys was $3.50. It's $3.95, as of a last-minute shift toward what is, in truth, a more equitable figure.

Speaking of anthologies of stories by new writers, would you like to be in one someday? Do you have any talent? Do you have six weeks' time this summer, and about $1500 for tuition, room, board, and transportation? (You can get undergraduate or graduate credit, by the way, and it will probably be transferable. There is also some scholarship money, but

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don't count on it.) Then if you think you can tough it out against six professional instructors, of whom Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm and I are three, try the Clarion Writing Workshop at Michigan State University, from late June into early August. For more information, write to:

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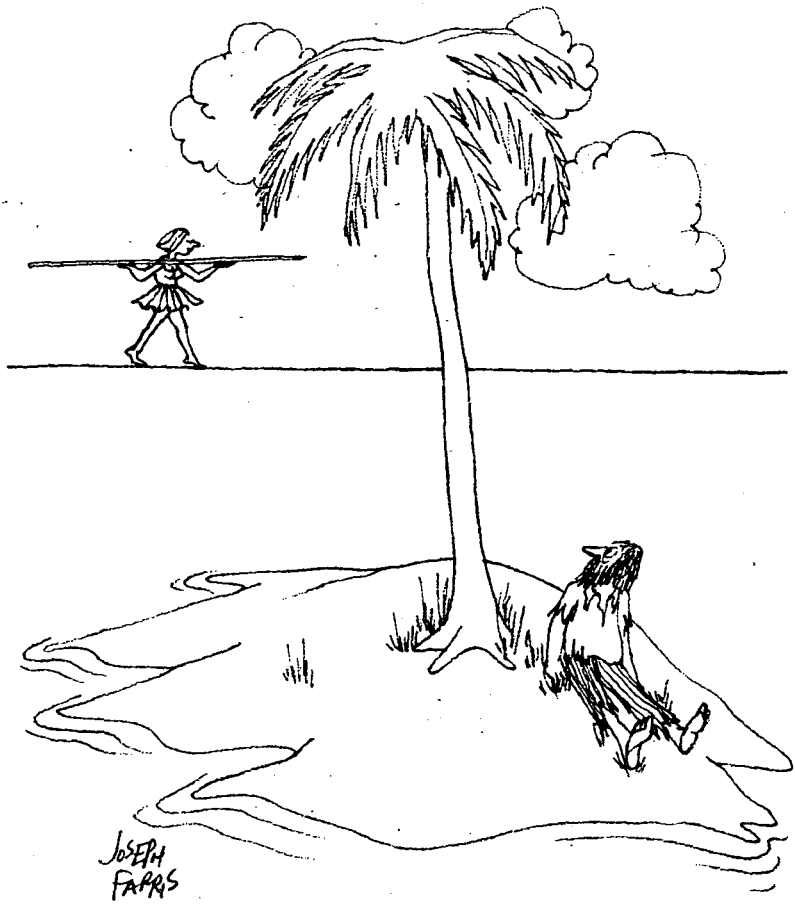

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"Monkey see, monkey do" is an old cliche that is given new life and meaning by Steven Hardesty in his first story for F&SF . He writes that "Turnabout" is also his first sale although he has collaborated on an sf adventure novel. "My background is prosaic," he adds. "I am not often mistaken for Robert Redford. My wife did not marry me for my money." He is currently working on a science fiction/thriller novella, having recently completed a time-travel novel featuring Edgar Allen Poe.

Turnabout

BY
STEVEN HARDESTY

He awoke five thousand meters above the planet. That gave him barely enought time to remember his name was Casimir Ingo before the chutes were popped and his tiny prison pod, homing on a beam fron the planet below, plopped into a barren field beneath an orange sky swept by storm clouds and blowing ice. He slapped the lever in front of his nose. The hatch opened, and the net in which he had slept for a light-year parted, and he fell out of the pod face-first into the cold mud.

"I'll get even for this!" he croaked, staggering to his feet and shaking a fist at the sky. It was the first time he had heard his own voice the whole long, drowsing trip to banishment on this planet he did not know. And it was the first time he had seen his own arm in a year — once thickly muscled, it was now puny and slack, trembling as he held it before his astonished eyes. He pulled open the prison jump suit that, a light-year back, had been sleek and tight on his massive frame. Now he saw it hang limp on a bony chest. A year's hibernation in a prison pod had robbed him of the body it had taken him twenty years to build! "Oh, I *will* get even," he croaked again.

He looked around him. Where were the others? He saw nothing but a vast field of red mud, a horizon irregular with black mountains, and an orange sky dumping slush. Nearby, out of a waist-high mud tower, a red-furred lizard peered at him with green cat eyes, its hackles rising. Of course Casimir had not expected a welcoming committee, but to this prison planet had been sent 231 other banishees. Surely one of them should be here now offering Casimir a hand-

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shake, a blanket, and a Thermos of hot coffee. "I'll get even for that, too," he grumbled.

Shivering with cold and staggering with his weakness, Casimir Ingo tramped across the red mud to the massive, two-story, whitewashed log cabin above which rose the last symbol of the civilization that no longer wanted Mr. Ingo's attendance — the tower from which radiated the beam that drew prison pods planetside. The others must be inside, he reasoned.

The cabin had not been whitewashed in years. Wood and rain had splintered the logs and knocked out enough clay chinking to admit between the logs something as large as a cat. On the door was the tarnished plate reading PRISON 0058A. It broke from its screws and fell in the mud as he opened the door.

Inside, the cabin was like an old-fashioned Swiss chalet, and it was bitter cold. Streams of dirty yellow ice had formed beneath the broken chinking. Wind howled through the shattered windows. The floor was littered with torn books and old clothing. Over it all were muddy footprints where three-toed creatures large and small had scampered. Where *was* everybody?

He went through the ground-floor rooms. The stone hearths were filled with frozen ashes, rain dripping on them. The barracks rooms with their rows of bunk beds stank of mud tracked over the mattresses by three-toed feet. In the kitchen, huge steel pots had been overturned and scoured, apparently by scavenger animals. Casimir went from pantry to pantry, from refrigerator to freezer to stove, and found nothing to eat. The place was littered with cans not opened but crushed — as though squeezed in a vise — and then torn apart. No food, no heat — how was he going to survive? If those 231 banishees wanted to move out onto this cold, bleak world, why did they have to destroy everything before they left? "Damn them all!" he roared to the cabin. "You can bet I'll even the score for this!"

He stomped upstairs, where it was all the same, the beacon machinery in its safety case mud-tracked but working, the only thing left to welcome him to exile.

"Hello," said a voice breathy and childlike, finishing the word with a snap.

Casimir glanced up at the ceiling and was startled to see there a creature bright as fire, with green eyes, a lizard's yellow beak, lustrous fur, and a thick, meaty tail that it preened. Casimir in his full strength was afraid of nothing, but it was a debilitated Casimir Ingo who gazed into those hourglass pupils and who jumped back against the wall as the creature said again, "Hello(snap)!"

The animal skittered across the ceiling on three-toed feet, and Casimir shouted, "Don't come any closer!"

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He grabbed a chair to defend himself, and a thrill of terror ran through him as he realized he was too weak to lift it. He snatched up a paperweight from a desk and hurled it at the animal. The creature scurried backward across the ceiling, down the wall, and out a door under the lintel.

Casimir stood frozen to the wall. It was not fright of a strange animal the size of a terrier that kept him, but full realization of his weakness and vulnerability in a friendless place. They had stolen from him his magnificent body! "I'll get even with *all* of you for that, believe me!"

The furry lizard put its head around the door lintel and mimicked, "I'll get even with *all* of you for that, believe me(snap)!"

Hungry, frightened, outraged, Casimir grabbed a pair of scissors and flung them at the creature. The animal backpedaled, squeaked in surprise, and dived out a broken window.

Casimir ran to the window and watched the animal scramble across the muddy red field toward a collection of waist-high mud towers. He could see more towers scattered across the field. What had happened here? Why was the cabin abandoned?

The small twin suns began to set beyond the mountains. Casimir would have to hole up here tonight and scrounge what food he could find inside. Tomorrow he would search for the trail of the other prisoners, and when he caught up with them, he would make them understand he did not appreciate this type of shabby reception. Meantime, he had to do something to keep out the lizards.

He went into the basement stores and brought up planks, rusty nails, and a nail gun and went to work boarding broken windows and sealing doors. It was nearly full night when he finished. He piled scrap wood in a fireplace and went into the kitchen to search for something with which to start a fire. In the first drawer he opened he found a package of heat tablets. Where had the 231 gone that they had carried off all the food but not all the heat tabs? He tossed one into the fireplace and had a blaze that began to draw the cold and damp out of the room.

He found a clean blanket in a closet full of clean blankets. Blankets — why had they been left behind? He wrapped up, took a torch from the fire, and went carefully through the cabin, searching every closet and pantry. What he found puzzled him even more: None of the emergency supplies had been taken, none of the backpacks, only a little of the heavy clothing. He found a flashlight with working batteries and used it to find the basement electric generator. He started it easily. Fresh batteries and an easily started generator? He went back to the room with the fire and tested the lights. They worked. The whole cabin was in perfect working order. He could redaub the chinks,

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clean the chimneys, and straighten the kitchen and he would live comfortably — if he could find some food. What had happened here? Where *was* everyone?

In his debilitated condition, the little work he had done had exhausted him. Casimir turned off the generator and fell asleep before the fire. Late at night he woke to the rasping of three-toed feet on the outside wall of the cabin. A dozen pairs of green eyes stared at him through the sealed windows. He turned on the flashlight and they fled. He restarted the generator to leave the lights on to keep away the lizards as he hung blankets over the windows. He left the lights on and went back to sleep.

Morning woke him with its cold. The fire had long since died. Bright sunlight forced its way around the blankets covering the cabin windows. He looked out, and there were no furry lizards in a landscape of frozen red mud. Shivering with cold, he built another fire in the hearth for company. He started the water heaters for a shower.

Bathed and refreshed, dressed in a new jump suit from cabin stores and pulling around himself a crown-to-toe quilted coat, he opened the cabin door and stepped out onto the planet that was to be his world for the rest of his life. The air was biting cold and had in it some of the rankness of a farm field. This would not be too bad, he told himself, if he could find some food — and the 231 others.

There was not a mouthful of food in the cabin, unless he wanted to boil shoe leather; he had to find something today. He tramped around the cabin looking for clues telling in which direction the other prisoners had marched away. He found nothing but more tin cans crushed as if in a vise and then ripped apart and scoured out. None of those 231 knew how to use a can opener?

At the rear of the cabin, he stopped short. Above a heap of animal bones, nailed to the rear cabin wall, were hundreds of red-furred animal pelts. Large ones, small ones, some just fur and others the pelt with lizard beak and little three-toed feet attached. "Oh, my God," he said, staggering back until he lost his balance and sat down with a thump.

The pelts were as beautiful as red mink in the bright morning sun. A light breeze carried from them a certain musty scent that was wild. Those things would make fabulous coats to clothe elegant women on distant planets. But of what use was fur trapping here? The coat Casimir wore proved the 231 had all the warm clothing they needed.

"Food!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "They were eating the lizards!"

"Food! They were eating the lizards(snap)!" cried a breathy child's voice at his side.

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Casimir leaped around. A lizard the size of a dachshund peered up at him as it preened its thick tail.

"My God," croaked Casimir, "you can *speak*."

"My God you can speak(snap)," replied the lizard.

"Who are you? Where are the other prisoners?"

The creature cocked its head and said, "Who are you(snap)?"

"Do you speak? I mean, really speak?"

"Do you(snap)?"

Casimir laughed, and it was good to laugh after so much had gone so wrong. "Well, I suppose you're no dumber than a talking parrot. Just as well. I'd hate to eat anyone who can give me conversation, and I *am* going to eat you, my friend."

"I'm going to eat(snap)," replied the lizard, raising its tail with a certain pride in accomplishing those few words.

"Where's my ax?" Casimir's boots chipped up frozen mud as he strode back into the cabin.

"Where's my ax(snap)?" said the creature trotting beside him, its claws clacking on the hard earth.

Casimir went into the cabin, and the creature followed. Casimir found the ax in the basement, and when he returned to the room where he had left the lizard, he found it sitting in a chair before the fire, warming its paws and feet and looking for all the world as if it wanted a pipe.

Casimir, unnerved, said, "Listen here, you. Do you understand what I'm saying or not?"

"Listen here you(snap)?" replied the creature, something like a smirk gleaming from its green eyes.

"Nope, you don't understand a thing. Eating you is no different from eating a cow." The animal almost seemed to nod in agreement. Casimir bashed it between its green eyes.

The skinning, cutting up, and cooking took the rest the morning. At last Casimir gorged himself and fell asleep before the fire.

He awoke in late afternoon, full of confidence in his new world now that he had found a food supply. Pale orange sunlight streamed into the room, and a dozen of the red-furred creatures clustered around him, asleep on the floor. He had forgotten to close the kitchen door! They all slept as he had slept — curled up on one side and wrapped in a blanket. They snored as he had snored. One fat little beast stood by the fire doing his best without thumbs to stir the coals with a poker. Casimir jumped up with a surprised shout, and the creatures bolted from the room and the cabin, scrambling across the frozen mud to their distant towers.

Casimir had never heard of an animal taking revenge for the killing of one of its kind, but he no desire to be a test case. He fashioned a sling for his ax and draped it over his shoulder.

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He went out back to tack up on the rear cabin wall the hide of the creature he had eaten. Then he dropped in the pockets of his quilted coat a few chunks of meat and pulled on a huge waterproof sombrero with earflaps. He carefully locked the cabin doors and tramped off to find the trail of the 231 prisoners who had disappeared. In the last hours of afternoon, he would make a wide circuit through the barren red field, never losing sight of the cabin, and surely he would cross their trail.

He did not. Evening drew on; the orange sky deepened and clouded; a bitter, freezing rain began to blow. Casimir popped a bit of meat into his mouth and turned back toward the cabin. Cold as this planet was — and devoid of such amenities as females, horse races, and poker — it wasn't a bad place, really, he decided. The orange sky held a certain raw beauty, and the frozen tundra that rolled on in every direction called a man to adventure. Plus, there was plenty to hunt. On a diet of lizard meat and living the life of a frontiersman, he would have his strength back in no time. He would begin his exercises this evening, in fact.

He began to whistle a jolly tune and was amused to hear its echo. There's no echo on a plain, he thought. He stopped. And turned. Behind him were three chipper, furry lizards, faces as attentive as poodle dogs, doing a remarkable job of whistling.

"Damn you," said Casimir out of a suddenly dry mouth, "you had me going there. What are you three doing out here?" He unslung his ax.

"Damn you(snap)?" replied the creatures in a happy chorus.

"I should've expected that."

"I should've—"

"Aw, shut up! You've spoiled my afternoon, you jerks."

"You've spoiled—"

"Shut up, I said!" His eye fell on one of the waist-high mud towers and a bright splash of blue that lay by it. He snatched up a muddied, torn, blue sweater. They had been here, at least! He looked out over the plain, searching for any sign of their trail, but could find none. "Tomorrow, then," he said with fresh hope. "Tomorrow I'll start right here and walk all the way to those mountains if I have to, but I'll find 'em. And I'll make them pay for leaving me here alone with these," he said scornfully, glaring at the three lizards.

He turned back to the cabin and threw the blue sweater over the mud tower to mark the place. Behind the tower was a strange mud construction — a cube. Odd, he thought, but what animal makes things in squares? He looked at the lizards watching him with rapt attention, and an unpleasant sensation caused him to turn his eyes back toward the log cabin and its beacon tower. The mud cube and the mud tower were miniature models of the prison buildings!

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Blowing slush slapped his face, startling him unreasonably. He clutched the ax and strode quickly toward the log cabin, watching over his shoulder the three lizards sitting in the icy mud watching him go. As he opened the cabin door, they whistled a few last bars brought to him on the wind. He slept before the fire, his ax by his side, the lights on.

Dawn streaked the night sky with bronze. It was bitter cold. Ice lay in patches on the dark red mud. Casimir woke instantly, lighted the fire, and began the electric water heater. In jump suit, boots, gloves, and a scarf over his ears and mouth, he went out into the bright morning to begin the exercises to rebuild his body. He was startled that he could manage only twenty push-ups and sit-ups. When he fell off the doorframe trying his third chin-up, he was filled with self-disgust. It would take him years — years! — to regain his strength. What about stamina? That was even more important to him now that he had to search a planet for the others.

He locked the cabin door and walked across the frozen mud, walking faster until he was warm enough to break into a jog, and from a jog to his favorite long, loping run. Behind him he heard the scratching of three-toed feet on hard mud and suddenly realized he had left his ax in the cabin. Weak or strong, Casimir Ingo would not let himself be terrorized by idiot lizards with a talent for mimickry. He made a leaping turn and came down jogging in place, ready for anything.

He was *not* ready for what he saw — a dozen lizards the size of Great Danes, wearing mud-spattered, quilted coats and sombreros with earflaps, all looking like hairy children in Daddy's clothes, and tottering on back feet and tails. They began to jog in place.

"Whoop!" cried Casimir as he jumped around and ran full-out for the cabin.

"Whoop! Whoop(snap)!" cried the lizards, dropping to all fours and waddling quickly after him.

Casimir slammed and barred the cabin door as the dozen lizards waddled up. "Whoop! Whoop(snap)!" they cried. Casimir ran from door to door, from window to window, checking every lock and seal and nailed board. He sagged into the chair before the fire, heart pounding, sweat draining over his face, and asked himself with a start, What am I afraid of? He got up to look out of the window. The dozen lizards — grotesque in their padded coats and sombreros — were scampering across the field toward the distant mud towers, yelping, "Whoop(snap)!" How did they get the coats and hats?

"Damn them,' he said, raising a trembling hand to wipe sweat from his face. "Damn," he said again, thinking of his wretched situation alone on a cold planet with only those absurd lizards for company.

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He showered and dressed as the morning's bronze fled from the sky and the two tiny twin suns shone orange. With a very special satisfaction, Casimir breakfasted on lizard steak. He put on padded walking boots and the quilted long coat. He took a rucksack from stores and piled into it his needs, strapped on his ax, put a compass in his pocket, and went out of the cabin as he clapped on his sombrero.

Morning glittered on patches of ice and sparkled off the mud towers. There were no lizards to be seen. He struck out for the tower from which hung the blue sweater. It was still there, frozen to the tower that stood next to the mud box that was a parody of the prison cabin. In fury, Casimir kicked over the tower and ground the cabin beneath his boots.

He moved on, using his compass and counting paces to divide the flat, open land into sectors to sweep. By midmorning he had coverd a large area, unannoyed by lizards. Now three of them as small and friendly as puppies came scampering up, yelping, "Whoop! Whoop(snap)!" and nipped each other.

"Get away from me!" Casimir yelled. He swung his ax at them.

The three lizards tumbled back over each other, yelling, "Get away (snap)!" They scrambled back a few meters and stood there looking expectantly at Casimir.

"Damn you," he grumbled. "Get out of here!" He chucked a rock at them and they ran. He reached down for another rock and found a food can. It had been crushed as if in a vise, torn open and scoured out. He turned it over and over in his gloved hands. Why hadn't they used a can opener?

At noon, when he built a small fire on the mud to heat his lizard steak, Casimir had already found a dozen more crushed cans, a score of torn items of clothing, and a work boot whose heavy metal toe had been crushed like the cans.

He had lifted to his mouth the first piece of lizard when he heard a breathy voice at his ear mumble, "Damn you get out of here(snap)!" He looked around as he reached for his ax and came face to face with the three little lizards — one of them carried a food can in its beak and another a glove. They dropped their trophies at his feet and looked up at Casimir, as bright and attentive as puppies.

The can was crushed just as those back in the cabin, but it had not been torn open and it was full. He tossed it to the lizards and said, "Let me see you open it." They fell on it using their beaks to shear the metal, and then two of them pulled it apart in a tug-of-war. "Oh, my God," said Casimir. The lizards offered him the can. "Go ahead, go ahead." So it was not the 231 who had trashed the cabin and devoured all the food: It was the lizards. They had used the cabin for their supermarket and department store, and the cabin and its tower for their peculiar mud

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models. A cargo cult made even more absurd because all the true believers were nonsentient. But where were their 231 gods?

A throb of dread ran through Casimir. He held up the glove and the crushed can. "Show me where you got these." The child-lizards scrambled across the red field, nipping at each other and tumbling over each other and crying, "Show me where(snap)!"

In late afternoon, after long, frustrating hours following the three small lizards as they played over the fields and low hills, Casimir looked up to see, set behind the hills, the outlines of another massive, two-story cabin and looming beacon tower. He was astonished: No one had told him there was a second cabin on this planet. The others must be inside!

He ran up the last low hill as afternoon clouds darkened the sky and icy rain blew in his face. Below him he saw the cabin, from which the whitewash had been weathered off completely, and the huge tower. There was no light in the windows. Around the cabin were dozens of red-furred lizards, some dressed in quilted coats and sombreros and others in weird odds and ends.

Casimir ran down the hill, the three small lizards scampering at his heels. He ran to the door. There was no door. There were no windows. There was nothing but a huge slab of frozen mud sculptured to look like logs and doors and windows. With his ax he battered at the wall, and battered and battered until sweat broke out on his face and his arms were exhausted. He found nothing in the wall but mud and more mud.

He dropped his ax and ran to the adjacent tower. Mud! All of it! "What is this?" he said with trembling voice.

"What is this(snap)?" said a hundred breathy voices behind him.

Casimir turned to face the lizards, all of them staring at him with expectant green eyes. "Where are the people?" he shouted.

"Where are the people(snap)?"

He stared out over a sea of red fur and green eyes, hundreds more waddling over the hills toward the cabin. "What is this all about?"

"What is this all about(snap)?"

"You bastards," he shrieked, shaking both fists at the lizards, "if you've done anything to the people, I'll get even with you!"

"I'll get even with you(snap)!" shrieked the lizards.

The lizards surged forward through the blowing slush, and Casimir, screaming curses, ran behind the mud cabin to make for home, where he could lock himself in safety. And there he found the 231 others. Above a pile of human bones, nailed to the rear wall of the mud cabin, were 231 human pelts, some with heads and hands and feet and some not, all as neatly cured and tanned as can be done by creatures with three-toed paws and no thumbs.

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In which Vinnie Jones, first officer and pilot of the One-Eyed Reilly, *ferries six comedians to an interworld competition. She figured the trip should be amusing . . .*

The Nifty Murder Case

BY
RICHARD MUELLER

Vinnie checked the cut of her blouse in the bulkhead mirror, turning left, then right, nodding in approval. Perfect. Provocative, yet nothing shows. Alluring, but still the efficient ship's officer. Silver blouse, black slacks tucked into black leathryn boots. Well, she thought, I can't do better with what I've got.

With what I've got. She pulled experimentally on the corner of one eye, tilting her head to the light. No age lines yet. They'd begin showing in a year or two, but until then . . . .

"What are you doing?" came a rasping annoyance that passed for a voice. "Primping?"

The ship's steward was standing impatiently in the passageway, its barrel frame pumping up and down on its pneumopeds.

"Our passengers are aboard," it said coldly. "You're supposed to get them settled in, not . . . *click, click, click* . . . seduce them." The droid's sensor plate flared red.

"Scooter, I do believe you're embarrassed," Vinnie laughed. "I didn't know you were capable of it."

"Embarrassed? Ashamed, perhaps, of the conduct of the *One-Eyed Reilly's* first officer. What you do, the way you comport yourself, reflects on the good name of this ship, of the Merchant Service, of Skipper and myself . . . ."

The bulkhead commlink chimed softly. "My ears are burning," it said. Vinnie sighed. It wasn't easy, plying the space-lanes on a ship whose other crew members consisted of a pilot that was half gaseous being, half computer interface, and a Victorian steward who thought that a hot evening consisted of a furious game of whist and perhaps charades. The last

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three trips we've done snatch-and-grab cargo runs. It's been two months since I've seen anything in the man department except the faces of leering controllers on the commscreen and sweating stevedores in the cargo bay. There are going to be six men on this trip, and I'll be damned if I'll play Saint Vinnie the Nun.

"O.K., listen," she said, but Skipper's voice cut her off. He had that ability. No matter what anyone was saying, with whatever intensity, he knew just how to modulate his voder circuits to get the point across. He knew just how to use that impressive mind. Vinnie was often grateful that Skipper had no interest in politics.

"Scooter, you leave Vinnie alone. She is not a droid, she's a woman. A human woman, with human needs. I know . . . I have complete confidence that she will not neglect her duties."

"Well, I'm not so sure . . . ."

"And I'm your boss," came the icy rejoinder. Scooter was instantly silent, but his receptors again glowed crimson. Vinnie stifled a smirk with her hand.

"Now, if you are through delaying her, I believe that she has duties elsewhere, hmmmm . . . ?"

Scooter snapped his lifter angrily and stomped off down the passage. Vinnie sighed.

"I think you upset him."

"He'll get over it," Skipper chuckled. "He always does. Now, go and greet our guests."

• • •

A jump from Woodstien's World to Vardan. The passengers were all going to the same place: The Fourteenth Cycle Interworld Comedy Competition. Each arm cycle (about 2.4 Earth-standard years), comedians and would-be comedians from all over the Draco-Vardan Arm would meet in conclave on one of the settled worlds to perform, audition, and vie for the title of Laughmaster of the Void (D.V Sector.) This cycle it was Vardan's turn to host, and the dean of Vardanian comedy himself, Arragh "Gigglebox Eggjuggler" Hope, would be master of ceremonies. Skipper had promised to ground the *Reilly* long enough for Vinnie to catch some of the competition, and with six comedians aboard, she figured that at the least the trip would be amusing. At the least.

Conversation ceased the moment she entered. Six faces looked up, with expressions ranging from delight to . . . was that annoyance? Relax, Vinnie. When in doubt, act the professional.

"Gentlemen, my name is Vinnie Jones, first officer and second pilot of the *One-Eyed Reilly*. I wish to welcome you aboard—"

At that moment she stopped abruptly. The seated ones were rising, possibly out of politeness, but there was obviously something else in it. It was as if they were acknowledging the roars of a crowd, the intersecting

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beams of Astrokliegs and Nova-Troupers. They're all onstage, she thought, and her estimation of the situation slipped a few notches. Unbidden came a remembrance, her mother's admonition about watching out for actors. Still . . .

One of the passengers stepped forward and raised a hand. The others froze. He was an older man, somewhere in the indeterminate cosmetic stretch between forty and sixty — adding for whiskey and drugs, subtracting vitamins and faceplaning. His hair was slightly silvered and slicked back, a pencil mustache capping the lines of a bulldog jaw, and his eyes . . . Vinnie started. They were the eyes of a week-dead bloatfish, but a bloatfish sheathed in steel. He smiled, just enough to reveal cut luxite teeth. She wondered that they weren't filed to points.

"Hello, Ms. Jones," he rasped in a barely audible register, his thumbs hooked in the pockets of a beaded emeraldskin lounging jacket, fingers heavy with bejeweled rings. "I'm Billy Nifty, the impressario. P'raps ya hearduh me, no? Thas O.K. You spacetypes doan get downa see us too often, downa Earth, sota speak, eh?"

The others dutifully laughed. Vinnie nodded. Billy Nifty raised both hands in an open acknowledgment, chopping off the laughter.

"They alla loveme. E'ryone loves Billy Nifty, you'll see. I thank ya for ya hospitality, an' we'll get acquainted betta after we jump, no?"

"Certainly," Vinnie said, holding her temper. She'd never liked wheeler-dealers, and she especially hated anyone telling her how to do her job, but she swallowed her anger and smiled.

"That would be very nice." You little lizard, you can go suck a thruster. "Now as to the static tanks—"

"Thas O,K,, too," Nifty said imperiously. "We all traveled a lot, I'm sure, as these boys is all comedians, an' comedians travel — am I right, boys?"

The others nodded, some of them verbally.

"So we can all strap in." Nifty permitted himself a leer, and Vinnie couldn't prevent the dirty-look lines from turning up at the corners of her mouth. Nifty either pretended not to notice, or he was so used to looks of disgust that it didn't register.

"Thank you, Ms. Smith."

"Jones."

"Cert'nly. We'll see you later, then, O.K.?"

Vinnie turned and stalked out of the compartment.

"A charmer," Skipper said softly as she strapped herself into her bridge couch.

"You heard, huh?" It's guys like that that give show business a bad name."

"Vinnie, it's guys like that that give humans a bad name. Lifting sequence."

"Tower, ground, translation point. Count back."

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"Counting. Five-four-three-two-one."

The static field kicked in and, dully, she felt the shock as the ship liftedranjumped . . . .

Out.

And in.

Merchants or navy, she'd never gotten used to the statics. She always swam up through Jell-O, feeling like she'd eaten cardboard hors d'oeuvres and washed them down with a pitcher of fusil oil. And the ringing. Alarm?

"Vinnie."

"Shhh-kipper? Yes?"

"Vinnie, we've got a cessation of life-form reading in the passenger section."

"Ugh. On my way. Can you keep 'em down till I get there?"

"Partial static?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

She stumbled into the doorway to the passenger section, avoiding the residual leak coming from the compartment. No one in sight. All in their cabins, most likely. She tapped the nearest commlink and waited while Skipper siphoned off the remaining static. Then she went knocking on doors.

At the third one she got no answer. Cautiously she went in.

Billy Nifty was lying peacefully on his couch. She could tell at a glance, from his still chest, that they would never get more acquainted than they had been. He was out — not breathing, dead. She sealed the cabin and punched in, trying to keep as far from the corpse as possible.

"Skipper."

"I know, Vinnie. I've got you monitored. I'm sending Scooter."

"What the hell for?"

"Can you do an autopsy?"

She swallowed hard. "Is it necessary?"

"Not necessary. Recommended. Now, you go and calm the other passengers."

The passengers needed little calming, and their reactions were scarcely ones of grief.

"Dead? Really? It's about time."

"Nifty? You don't say. I didn't know you could kill someone without a heart."

"Righty-dighty! Break out the champagne."

"Dead? That reminds me of the story about the New Ukrainian girl and the traveling Vardanian exotic animal salesman . . . ."

Vinnie quickly retreated to the bridge to sort things out. The ship was on course, under jump, and there was nothing for her to do. And she wanted to be away from the passengers for a while. The universal joy at Mr. Nifty's demise had shaken her. Skipper, still awaiting the results of the autopsy, was solicitous.

"They don't exactly seem overcome with sorrow, do they?"

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"Skipper, I got no feelings of warmth from Nifty, but that's no reason to wish a man dead. They're like vultures . . . ."

"Perhaps I should have let them perform the autopsy."

"Skipper!"

"Sorry, bad joke. But you met the man. He didn't exactly inspire blind loyalty or overwhelming love, did he?"

Vinnie rubbed her forehead with the palm of her hand. In eight years with the navy, she'd never seen a corpse — derelict ships, wreckage, but never a dead body close up. She decided that she didn't like them.

"Skipper, I thought he was a slug, but I wouldn't have killed him for that."

There was a pause. "Vinnie, what makes you think he was murdered?"

"Well, I . . ."

"People have died under static before."

"No." Skipper was wrong. She had no proof, but the attitude of those men was enough. Nifty had earned a murder from someone. Maybe from all of them. One of them had even assumed that he had been killed. And a static-induced heart attack wasn't all that common. "I think he was murdered. By one of them. I don't know how, but . . ."

"But perhaps the autopsy will tell us."

"O.K."

Five minutes later Scooter appeared in the hatchway. "The passengers were calling for food, so I prepared a buffet."

"What about the autopsy?" Skipper and Vinnie said together.

"Oh, that." Scooter's preparing arm shot out. "A homeotropic dart, embedded in the base of the couch. It was lodged in his spine. No doubt it was arranged to trigger with the activation of the static field, killing Mr. Nifty while he was under. Quite efficient."

"Efficient? Scooter, you're talking about a murderer."

"Well, at least *he's* neat," Scooter said, and stomped off. Vinnie turned the dart over in her hands. Skipper hummed reflectively.

"You were right, Vinnie. Now, the question is, Which one?"

"Gentlemen?"

They looked up, and she quickly fitted the names to the faces. Dan Cordon, tall, bearded, the best-looking of the lot, dressed in a paisley tartan polyetherane lounging suit. Stylish to a degree and fitted snugly into a caste that — though she had sometimes admired — Vinnie never felt comfortable with.

Pierre Martel, shorter, with a fringe of disreputable beard, though good-looking all the same and more to her own height. Martel spoke with a Canadian accent and dressed in designer flannels, like a stylish lumber-jack.

The cadaverous Merle Shoals looked like a towering undertaker's

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assistant. His deep-set eyes and low, rapid-fire speech took getting used to, and he wore a black bodysuit broken only by a luminous legend worked over his right chest: "Ugly But Harmless."

Baker Steeves, an open-faced, pleasant young man, was Shoals's manager. She wasn't sure, but she believed that it was Steeves who had made the remark about Nifty having been "killed."

And the last, Rand ee Duckworth, was the strangest; a flaked-out dusthead, decked in the oddest collection of cast-off clothes she'd ever seen: electric epaulets, chartreuse ear cups, silver magnetwill pumpkin pants — and any number of pieces that, taken by themselves, might be acceptable, but together made Rand ee Duckworth an extra in a hallucinogenic nightmare.

I know I've been out of touch with the vids, but I never thought I'd get that *out of touch.*

"Ah, Ms. Jones," Cordon said smoothly. "Allow me to offer our assembled condolences."

"Your what?"

"For 'aving to deal weeth theess Neefty," Martel said. "A nasty coostomaire, dead or alive." The others nodded in agreement.

"Look," Vinnie said angrily. "I don't know what grievances you had against him" — *though I aim to find out* — "but don't expect me to share them. Murder is a serious business, and under the regulations of the Merchant Service, as a ship's officer, I'm required to investigate."

Shoals fixed her with a drooping eye. "By all means. How did he die?"

"That's privileged information," she said quickly, watching them for some hint of excessive concern, but none came. Duckworth sat down heavily.

"Whoo Hoo." He looked at his fingernails, then popped them in his mouth. "Whmumph hbumph."

"I wouldn't worry about Rand ee," Steeves whispered. "He's always like that."

"Crazy but harmless," Shoals supplied. "But for some reason audiences really go for his act, I guess because everyone's known a Rand ee at one time or another, or has been one — but what do I know?"

Shoals's mouth shut with a sharp clack, and he stood, breathing heavily, eyes bulging. I may have known a moonstoner like Rand ee, Vinnie thought, but you are something else again.

"Hey, now." Cordon was beaming, laying on a full load of charm. He gestured expansively. "Investigate. Let the chips fall where they may. I have nothing to hide. There's no problem."

"I'm sorry, but there may be."

"Who's that?" Rand ee yelped.

"I'm sorry. I should introduce myself. I'm Skipper, owner and first officer on the *One-Eyed Reilly.*" They all stared at the commlink speaker. "And there may be a serious problem."

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"What's that?"

"We are scheduled to come out of jump in three days and make planetfall on Vardan the day after. The moment we touch down on Vardan, the crime becomes — under Vardanian law — the jurisdiction of Sargon Yard, Vardan's central police agency. The Vardanians are most methodical. They will investigate the case from every angle until they arrive — after lengthy deliberation — at a solution. While they are determining, they will impound this ship and all aboard her."

"Impound?" Cordon said tightly, losing several degrees of self-assurance. "How long do these things usually take?"

"Days. Weeks. I know of one case that lasted nearly a year."

"Far out," Rand ee giggled.

"But the convention lasts only a week," said Steeves.

"Regrettably, the impoundment is isolation. Total isolation. You will miss your convention. Vinnie will not be allowed to go on leave. I will be proscribed from taking on cargo. Unless . . ."

All eyes were glued to the commlink, even Duckworth's.

"Unless Vinnie and I can solve this case before we land, in which event the murderer will be incarcerated and the rest of us free to go about our business. But neither Ms. Jones nor I are trained detectives . . . ."

"How can we help?" Cordon said, a bit too sincerely.

"I'm glad you asked that," Skipper replied, turning on what Vinnie hoped was just the right amount of charisma. "Obviously, one of you gentlemen is a murderer."

"Obviously," Shoals repeated. Rand ee giggled to himself. Skipper pressed on.

"Therefore, the more Vinnie and I know about you, the better we'll be able to solve this case. It would, of course, be most helpful to know each of your true feelings regarding Mr. Nifty . . ."

"Why not just ask for a confession?"

" . . . but I certainly don't expect truth from a murderer, however appropriate his reasoning. There are two things I do feel justified in asking for. First, I'd like voice-verified permission to examine your personal datanet files . . . ."

"Now that's something I do feel I know about," Shoals said. "Yes, as Mr. Nifty intimated before his appropriate — nay, justified — demise — and intimated correctly, I might add — we are well-traveled, and as any well-traveled, worlds-traveling word-raveler would know, there is no way you can contact media-link while under jump, nossir. Impossible, am I right?"

The others nodded reflexively, Vinnie also, but Skipper was ahead of the game.

"True, but we will have a day on the approach to sift this data. In the meantime, I would request that we be allowed to see a sample of your work, perhaps a bit of the routines

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you plan on doing at the competition. On the chance that you do get to attend," he added ominously.

"Zat's a gret idea," Martel cried. "We could do ze conzert."

"Fine, good, great, capper, let's do it."

"Did you hear the one about . . . ?"

"Wait a minute," Steeves said. "I'm not a comedian, I'm a manager. What am I supposed to do? Watch?"

"An idea occurred to me, just now, while listening to the above — that is to say, the preceding exchange — on how to solve the question of including Baker, my manager, in the festivities. The idea is positively brilliant — or certainly adequate to the situation, what do I know? — but, if there are no objections, I propose that Baker serve as master of ceremonies, raconteur, coordinator, host of the evening . . . ." Shoals trailed off in a confused mumble, his huge eyes darting about the room. Steeves shrugged.

"Fine by me, I guess. Any objections?"

There were none. Steeves turned to Vinnie. "Well? When do you want this show?"

"Skipper? Any preference?"

"How about the day after tomorrow? Our last day under jump. It'll give us time to get acquainted."

The five nodded uncertainly, but all agreed, both to the concert and to the datanet access. Vinnie stopped to remind herself that one of them was a murderer, that there was a cold corpse sealed in Cubicle Three. Then the idea struck her.

"Topical."

"I beg your pardon, Ms. Jones," Cordon said suavely. Rand ee looked up, his hands vainly trying to untie the massive tangled knot holding on his capelet.

"Don't interrupt!" he screamed, then subsided.

"I said 'topical.' Could the concert have a theme?"

"Like a roast, you mean?"

"Roast?"

"Roast," said Shoals. "Roast. A comedic series of testimonials — or in this case, eulogies — in honor of a guest of honor; to whit, Mr. Nifty. Is that what you mean?"

Cordon smiled. "Very clever, Ms. Jones. Or may I call you Vinnie?"

"Vinnie's fine," she smiled.

"Oh-ho-ho," Martel murmured under his breath.

"Very well, a roast it is."

That was very clever."

Vinnie stood before the cabin windows, watching the gray neutral jumpspace flowing past. "So was your idea of a concert. Do you think it will accomplish anything?"

"Vinnie, I would shrug if I could. In the meantime, I would suggest that we find out as much as possible. And I have another idea . . . ."

It was simple. Vinnie and Skipper spoke to the passengers at every op-

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portunity. Skipper recorded and semantically analyzed all the conversations, provisionally disregarding everything each person said about their own relationship with Nifty and cross-indexing any comment relating to another passenger. Cordon proved the easist to talk to, Rand ee the most difficult. Cordon, Martel, and Steeves made passes at Vinnie; Shoals and Rand ee did not. Cordon and Shoals appeared to be the most knowledgeable, whereas Steeves, while seemingly cooperative, told them almost nothing. All five expressed a generally negative opinion of Nifty, and three — Shoals, Martel, and Steeves — had intimated that he deserved it. In all cases, Rand ee — wandering internally, semicatatonic — was the least helpful. On the night before the concert, Vinnie and Skipper took stock.

"You want to screen what we've learned?"

"Certainly."

"This is it, to date."

DAN CORDON: NIFTY'S JUNIOR BUSINESS PARTNER. NIFTY SWINDLED CORDON AND SOLD HIM OUT. RELATED BY MARTEL AND SHOALS.

RAND EE DUCKWORTH: SEVERAL INTERLOCKING DRUG HABITS. THESE MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH NIFTY. RELATED ONLY BY CORDON. THE OTHERS CLAIM THAT DUCKWORTH IS MERELY CRAZY.

• • •

PIERRE MARTEL: NIFTY ONCE HAD HIM BLACKLISTED FOR USING EXCESSIVE ETHNIC REFERENCES ON THE VID. RELATED BY CORDON AND SHOALS.

MERLE SHOALS: NIFTY HAD AN AFFAIR WITH HIS WIFE. RELATED BY CORDON AND STEEVES.

BAKER STEEVES: FORCED STEEVES' FLEDGLING AGENCY OUT OF BUSINESS. RELATED BY CORDON AND MARTEL.

"So? What have we got?"

"Vinnie, we've got four, possibly five motives. And some interesting permutations. Nifty was a busy man. In two cases, Martel and Steeves, the people in question corroborated the stories told about them. You'll notice that Cordon frinked . . . flinked?"

"Finked."

"Finked on all four of the others, but not on himself. And Steeves informed only on his own client."

Vinnie nodded, studying the screen. There was something there that was obvious, but she was missing it. "Well," she muttered. "He is young. He may not have the exposure . . . . Young? Hmmm."

"And Duckworth's drugs. Only Cordon mentioned that. None of the others."

"So?"

"So, that sort of aberration gets talked about, if people are inclined to talk, and show business people are. But only Cordon mentioned it."

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"Perhaps it's not widely known. Or new."

"No, Vinnie. Cordon told us. He'd tell the other people, if it's the truth. And if he's making it up, why? Why not say that Rand ee is crazy and leave it at that."

"Because it rules him out as a suspect?"

Skipper hummed that over. "No, not really. You can be crazy and still be calculating enough to rig a 'tropic dart, though Cordon may not know that. Very confusing, but I'd say that the key to this lies with Rand ee."

"But he's the only one we've got no motive for."

"Precisely."

Vinnie was dressing for the concert when the commlink chimed. She had decided on a deep apricot silk wraparound, cut low in the back. Maybe rattle someone into an incautious word.

"Yes?"

"Vinnie, I've got a possible cause."

"For Rand ee? A drug?"

"Yes, but it's not a drug. It's a creature called a Claud's Remora."

Vinnie froze, chills moving up from her feet. She took a deep breath, then coaxed a last curl of hair into place. "Never heard of it," she said. "What's it do?"

"It's a self-replicating nodal organism from New Ploesti. Suction miners discovered it there, living dormant in the petrodust beds. When it comes in contact with the human bloodstream, it is carried to the brain, where it sets up shop."

"Sounds ghastly. What's it do?"

"It lives there in a symbiotic relationship with its host. The host feeds it, and in return, it secretes minute amounts of psychoactive chemicals into the brain. These chemicals alter the brain functions in a fascinating way, by extending and encouraging the mechanisms of aberrant behavior. It is, in effect, a psychotic disinhibitor. A suspicious person becomes paranoid, a moody person manic-depressive. And I anticipate your next question: How could Rand ee have come in contact with Claud's Remora?"

"That's right. New Ploesti is restricted."

"Yes, but Claud's Remora has a commercial application. Psychotherapists use it to bring developing psychoses to the point where they'll respond to chemotherapy. Claud's Remora is marketed as Andrusil, and one pharmaceutical company has exclusive rights to exploit it. Nifco."

Vinnie's jaw dropped. "You don't think . . . ."

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out."

"When? How?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but keep on your toes tonight."

A stage had been raised in one end of the passenger's lounge, and

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Scooter had cannibalized stores to provide lighting. Vinnie and Scooter sat in the dark and waited. By the monitor lights, Skipper was also present. The day had been a hurricane of activity — though the actual physical construction had taken only a few minutes — and the performers had dithered about the ship, rehearsing sotto voce, avoiding each other and getting in Vinnie's way. Not one had even made a pass at her. You'd think that they were preparing for the performance of their lives. Considering what was at stake, perhaps they were.

"Is this classical comedy, or humor of a lower form?" Scooter whispered.

"Low, I would imagine," Vinnie replied. "Very low, but don't you be a snob. Be properly appreciative. We have a killer to catch."

"Snob, I never . . . And what's that have to do with . . . ?"

Scooter's protest was cut off by a recorded fanfare and intro music, the lights came up, and Baker Steeves stepped out onto the stage. He was dressed in a sequined geen velouralon cutaway and looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Vinnie nudged Scooter. "Applaud."

"What with?" the steward replied, but Vinnie's solitary clapping was joined by a polite applause from Skipper's speakers, swelling to an enthusiastic accolade. Steeves smiled bravely.

"Thenk you, thenk you, ladies and gentlemen. Excuse me, ladies and droids [laughter]. Thenk you. Welcome to the first annual William Nifty Roast, and probably the last [more laughter], held in this lovely hall — hey, lady, your sign fell down. That's a joke."

Skipper bled in a halfhearted chuckle, then followed it with a rhythmic, rising applause called a "continental." Vinnie knew that it meant "Let's get the show on the road." Steeves looked grateful and signaled for silence.

"Thenk you, and without further ado, our first roaster of the evening — he's a lumberjack and he's O.K. — ladies and lumpen, Pierre Martel."

Martel's act was coarse; vulgar; took snipes at Nifty through every known race, religion, species, and sex; and was very funny. Vinnie found herself laughing at jokes she remembered from the service, and jokes she wished she'd known in the navy. Definitely not sophisticated humor, she thought as Martel exited.

"Shocking," Scooter muttered.

"You're a stuffed shirt. You take things too seriously."

The men had drawn lots, and Dan Cordon was up next. His was a sleek and snappy lounge act, and he'd obviously tailored and aimed most of the material at Vinnie. She laughed, applauded, and realized with some guilt that she didn't find Cordon nearly as funny as she had Martel. Face it, Jones. You've a plebeian sense of humor. You'll never make it in society. Or maybe I just don't like Dan

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Cordon, she thought.

She wondered about that as Baker Steeves gamely changed the acts. Cordon's attractive, cultured, has that air of success about him, but I just don't like the man. Something's wrong there. She thought about the men she'd known and cared about: her father, her brothers, a high school sweetheart, navy shipmates, Stan Franklin back in the Archipelago. Well, I don't know what it is about Dan Cordon, but I do know what it isn't.

". . . a man who needs no introduction, or rather gets no introduction, because I wouldn't know how. The man with comets in his head, Rand ee Duckworth."

Steeves hastily exited the stage, leaving the pool of light vacant. After a long moment, Rand ee shuffled out onto the stage, looked about, then turned his back on the audience. Vinnie giggled in spite of herself.

At the sound, Duckworth turned and peered out into the dark, paused, then smiled. He proceeded to unfasten his pants.

"Ugh," Scooter whispered. "More gutter humor."

"I don't think so."

Rand ee dropped his floppy red pants, revealing a lumpy blue pair underneath. Then green and orange striped. Then yellow. Black. Maroon. Finally the silver magnetwill pumpkin pants were revealed. Rand ee started on his upper body.

By the time the nearly naked Rand ee was standing, confused, among an immense pile of clothing, Vinnie was helpless with laughter. Rand ee moaned, flapped his arms, then put both hands to his head. Indicating his brain, he said softly and clearly, "The factory's still there but . . . they're making something different now." Then, reaching for the pile, he began to put each item of clothing back on.

"I don't understand," Scooter said. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"I don't understand either, and yes, he's hilarious."

Then Billy Nifty's voice came from the back of the lounge.

"Uh, thank ya, Mistuh Duckwuth, but we seen enough."

Rand ee froze. He waited a beat, then went on with his dressing.

"I said thank ya, but could we have the next one, pleeze?"

Vinnie knew that it was Skipper imitating Nifty's voice. She'd heard his impressions before, but obviously Rand ee did not know. His face grew red and twisted.

"I'm not done yet!" he screamed.

"I'm sorry, but—"

"I said I'm not done yet, Father-Pig-Monster!"

Sound froze. Vinnie held her breath, waiting for the violent reaction Rand ee teetered over. Something was dropped backstage. Something small. Rand ee's hands formed into white-knuckled fists.

"Mistuh Duckwuth . . ."

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"Listen, you evil son of a slug, monster, raper, killer, bastard. I've heard, I've had years of you, years, bloody stinking years, you monster." Rand ee's teeth ground to a hiss. "When I kill you, you stay dead, stay dead, dead, stay dead . . . ."

"My word," from Scooter. No, not your word, Vinnie realized, but one more from Nifty-Skipper would do it. The commlink sighed.

"Uh, please, somebody get him offa da stage . . . ."

With a sharp cry, Rand ee crouched, then sprang out into the dark.

"I'll kill you again," he screamed.

And was unconscious when he hit the floor.

Vinnie washed the last of the static field out of her mouth. Rand ee Duckworth was fastened securely in his cabin, and they were back in realspace, some twelve hours out. Reception was picking up Vardan's broadcasts. She looked out of the cabin screens, no longer filled with neutral gray but with the familiar stars of Vardan's sky.

"So, how did you know?"

"Moment. I'm transmitting."

She rubbed her temples, squeezing her eyes closed. Nifty had obviously dosed Rand ee with the Remora — though for what reason she could not imagine — and he had taken his revenge. Case closed. But it didn't feel right. Too much missing. Too many whys.

Steeves, Martell, Shoals, and Cordon had expressed surprise and relief at Rand ee's confession (if anything a man in his condition said could be believed), as if each had expected to be discovered. But this wasn't *Murder on the Orient Express*. That was for fiction. There was one murderer here, she was convinced of it. She just wasn't sure that they'd gotten the right one.

"How did I know what?"

"That it was Rand ee?"

"I didn't know, and I don't. It was a gamble. I'm still not sure."

That shook her. "You either? Then what makes you think we *may* have the right man?"

"Well, he did confess. And I should get some sort of datanet confirmation. That was my transmission: file requests with their voice-verifications, plus Nifty's file."

"And if it's confirmed?"

"We hand him over to the Vardanian authorities."

"And if it's not?" she asked pointedly.

"And if it's not . . . wait one. Transmission coming in. If it's not, we hand Rand ee Duckworth over to the authorities as a prime suspect and accept impoundment."

"That's going to make some unhappy comedians," she said glumly, "but I'm glad you're doing the right thing. I don't think he did it."

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"Well," Skipper said softly, "neither do I. Against that we have a confession."

"From a madman."

"Yes . . . wait. *Good gods!*"

Vinnie froze. "Skipper, what is it?"

"Vinnie, get down to the passenger section now, quickly. Make sure Duckworth's all right. I think he's in danger of being murdered."

Trying to overcome the residual effects of the static, she stumbled up and out, heading aft. Skirting around Scooter in the galley, she snatched a handgun out of the ready locker and burst into the lounge, bowling over a confused Merle Shoals.

"Hey, what's . . . ?"

"Come on."

He was bending over Rand ee Duckworth's strapped down body, his hand concealing something, a knife perhaps.

"Freeze, Cordon, before I put a hole in you."

Cordon turned, bringing his cupped hands together, still hiding the object. He smiled broadly. Behind him Rand ee looked up blankly from his static couch, lying unmoving in his straps.

"What's the problem, Vinnie? I was just loosening Rand ee's straps a bit. They were cutting into him. No problem. No reason to point a gun at me, eh?"

She could feel Shoals and Martel in the doorway behind her. Too close. No room to maneuver. Don't know what's in that hand. If he makes a move, I'll . . . ."

"Vinnie, are you all right?"

"Yes, Skipper. You heard?"

"Yes, and I estimate by the sounds I heard before you arrived that Dan Cordon has a knife in his hand."

Cordon turned the knife outward, slowly. It was poised for throwing and — if he was good — she knew that he could have it in the air before she could squeeze the trigger. It was suddenly very cold.

"Mr. Cordon," Skipper said softly. "We know you killed Mr. Nifty. And we know why. Your files have come through. Your file says that you were married to a Virginia Melmar, that she left you and married William Nifty."

Cordon's face grew hard. "Does it also tell you that Nifty killed her? He killed Virginia. They were married on Churchwarden. The laws are very strict there. No divorce unless both parties agree. And she didn't, because she had a child, a son. So he killed her."

"And Rand ee Duckworth is her son?"

"That's right. Her's and Nifty's."

"And you'd kill him for that?"

Cordon looked like the question had never occurred to him. "Of course not. But Rand ee saw it. He was six. He saw him kill her, so Nifty injected him with Andrusil. He's been crazy ever since — augmentedly crazy — but I couldn't take the chance, with

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Nifty dead, that someone would tumble to the idea that he'd been chemmed and dose him with Halose."

"Halose?" asked Vinnie.

"The drug that reverses Andrusil. Lunatic chemotherapy might bring Rand ee out, but it'd destroy the memories. Halose would merely dump the Remora. He'd remember everything, including the murder. Then who do you think they'd come after for a motive?"

"So, you decided to kill his son?" Shoals asked disgustedly.

"Why not?" Cordon replied, his voice heavy with bitterness. "He killed my wife."

"But," Skipper said. "He's not Nifty's son. He's yours."

Captain of the Port Brauggh accepted his coffee with Akarak and inhaled deeply of the fragrant steam. He smiled benignly, exposing rows of sharp teeth.

"Lovely. We seldom get this good a grade here." He sipped delicately. "Aaah, marvelous. Thank you."

"You're quite welcome," Vinnie replied.

"It is indeed our pleasure."

The Vardanian eyed the commlink. "We seldom see a T'chlen ship, either. This is an honor. And an interesting criminal case. This day is thrice blessed."

"Glad to be of service,"Vinnie said. "What will happen to Dan Cordon?"

The saurian rumbled expansively, waving his great claws in the air. "The murder was premeditated. He will have time to serve, and rehabilitation therapy, but we are civilized on Vardan. We recognize the concept of a crime of passion, even passion long held, revenge long deferred. There are dramatic, sympathetic elements of the case that will not go unobserved. But tell me, how did you tumble to the facts? What put you on to Cordon?"

"Vinnie?"

"He seemed to know too much, something about everyone else. And, with one exception, the information was corroborated. But he was the only one who tagged Rand ee with a drug problem. That should have been the most obvious motive of them all, yet none of the others mentioned it. In a sense he pointed himself out."

"How so?"

"He knew too much to have anything but a deep interest in Nifty. He had obviously been researching the man. And his insistence on Rand ee's having a drug problem led Skipper to search through our pharmacopoeial data, which turned up Andrusil and Nifco."

"From there," Skipper continued, "I made the assumption that Nifty was involved and — since Cordon had linked him in a way that no one else could — that he must be our wild card. Still in all, we almost lost him."

"Oh?"

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"Yes. Though neither Vinnie nor I was convinced of Rand ee's guilt — and we knew there were major unanswered questions regarding Dan Cordon — Rand ee had confessed. That, coupled with the fact of his being Nifty's son and Nifty's wife's having died under suspicious circumstances, would have been enough to put him away. But the confession was a fluke. I had meant it as a ploy. I knew that I could provoke Rand ee by imitating Nifty, and I was hoping that the disturbance might force the murderer's hand, precisely because Rand ee was an unknown quantity. So, when he unexpectedly confessed, it seemed to wrap up the case . . . ."

"So, how did you discover him?" the port captain said, exasperation creeping into his tone.

"The media-link net. By themselves, the files were a meaningless jumble of information. But Cordon had given us too many clues. Nifco's being one of Billy Nifty's holdings. The drugs, Claud's Remora, Andrusil. And when the link turned up the fact that Cordon's wife had left him for Nifty, *and* that Nifty was sterile — a point that Cordon hadn't known — the rest fell into place. We were lucky," Skipper admitted sheepishly. "If we'd been a few seconds later, Dan Cordon would have murdered his own son."

"What will happen to Rand ee Duckworth?" Vinnie asked. The Vardanian put down his empty cup and sighed.

"Halose treatments and therapy. It will be rough on him for a while, I expect, but we'll get him back to normal. That's the least society owes its victims," he said gravely. Then he leaned forward, fixing Vinnie with a baleful eye.

"Still in all, you almost convicted the wrong man. I hope you've learned a lesson from all this."

"Yes," Skipper said contritely. "Leave police work to the professionals, right, Vinnie?"

"Well," she said. "I was thinking more along the lines of something my mother once told me about actors . . . ."

For Donna Kemeny and Michael P. Hodel, for different reasons.

Harlan Ellison could not contribute a column this month because of the press of his new position as creative consultant to the new *Twilight Zone* TV series. "Harlan Ellison's Watching" will resume next month with a report on *Dune* and *2010*.

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Lisa Tuttle's last story here was "Redcap," (September 1984). Her new story concerns a poet who returns to a midwestern university and stirs up a disturbing set of memories.

No Regrets

BY
LISA TUTTLE

In fifteen years Miranda Ackerman hadn't changed her style. She still looked as she had as a student in her blue jeans and Indian blouse, with her long, straight hair, and spectacles so large and round they seemed a comic affectation. But behind the glasses were webs of fine lines, and strands of silver glittered in her brown hair. She was thirty-six years old, not a student but the university's guest, the visiting poet.

As she left the airplane, Miranda imagined the person who would have been sent to meet her. She could see her already, a senior or first-year graduate student, heartbreakingly young and earnest, skittish in her shyness. She would have forsaken her customary denims for a dress or a suit in an attempt to look mature, and she would be surprised by the poet's youthful, casual air. Hearing the student's somewhat breathless, Texas-accented voice, in her struggle to be articulate, Miranda would be able to recognize herself at twenty-one and feel an almost painful tenderness.

She knew them well, these faithful students; she met them wherever she went on the lecture circuit. And as she came down the red-carpeted hall into the main concourse of the airport, Miranda saw a girl so precisely as she had imagined that she might have created her.

Sleek, shoulder-length dark hair; a soft, oval face with the prettiness of youth; an alarmingly new and businesslike three-piece gray suit. Dark eyes widened as Miranda approached: she seemed a horse about to bolt. "Miranda Ackerman?"

"Yes." Miranda smiled. "You must be—"

"Sarah Wells. From Burnham Uni-

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versity? I've come to drive you there?"

Miranda pitied the girl's nervousness and wished she could banish it with a word. But it would take time. The sixty-mile drive to Burnham would provide that.

Soon, as Miranda had expected, Sarah's admiration for the poet — for the life, revealed in a teasingly autobiographical novel, and for the poems — spilled out in a rush of words.

"*Changing the Universe* is probably my favorite book. I don't know how many times I've read it. Some of those poems I really identify with. Especially 'No Regrets.' That one made me cry. It made me think about my own future, about the choices I'll have to make. But I don't think I could be as brave as you!"

Knowing the answer already, Miranda asked, "Do you write poetry?"

Sarah gave her a shy, sideways look before returning her attention to the road. "Well, yes. It's not very good. Sometimes I despair! You'll have to read it and tell me the truth about it — I really want you to. I've already signed up to take your course, so there's no escape. Actually, it's not all so bad — I've had some of it published. But only in the school magazine, so that doesn't mean much. If you saw some of the garbage they publish — well, you *will* see it, of course. I can hardly believe it, Whatever made you . . . I mean, it's incredibly lucky for me — for all of us, of course — but I couldn't believe it when I heard you were coming here. I mean, Burnham University, of all places! Hicksville, U.S.A.!"

Miranda felt herself prickling defensively, but she said mildly, "I didn't come for a vacation, you know. I came to teach."

"Yes, but why? Wouldn't you rather be writing?"

"Of course, but poets have to eat, too. I'm used to living cheaply, but no one can live on air. You must know how little the magazines pay, when they pay at all."

"But you've had books published."

"One of my classes will be about the economics of being a poet in present-day America," Miranda said. "I can't live on my royalties. I depend on readings and lectures and special courses. I make my living from schools and universities, not my poetry. Although, of course, if it weren't for the poems, they wouldn't be interested in me."

"Mmm," said Sarah dubiously. "Still, *Burnham*. It must seem awful, after San Francisco and New York."

"San Francisco and New York weren't offering," Miranda responded rather tartly, "Burnham made me a very good offer: two semesters teaching, a light course load, with accommodation. I'll have lots of time to write, and I can save a lot of money. I was very lucky to get the job." It was the truth — she had told herself just that to counter the sinking feeling in her stomach as she looked at the re-

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turn address on the letter from the head of the English department. Because the rest of the truth, which she had no intention of telling this admiring student, was that this was the year when she'd had no choice. This was the year of wage freezes and changes in hiring policy, the first time her applications had been answered with form rejection letters. The happy days of balancing the drawbacks of Ohio against those of Kansas, the attraction of Ithaca versus Austin, were ended. It was Burnham, or it was back to waitressing, and Miranda didn't like to admit that both choices had felt like defeat.

"I only meant — well, of course, you couldn't know what Burnham is like," Sarah said, "I hope you don't find it too awful. I mean the university; anyway, that's not so bad. But the town — it's such a smug, boring, redneck little place. I don't guess you've ever been there before."

Briefly, Miranda was tempted to lie. But lies had a way of catching up with you. And what did it matter? She had made her escape, years ago. She said, "Actually, I have. I lived in Burnham once, for about a year."

"You did!" Sarah sounded at once appalled and delighted: Miranda could see her storing away this bit of information for future examination and comfort, perhaps to take courage from the poet's example. "But I thought — you didn't get your degree there?"

"No, I wasn't at the university. My boyfriend was a student. I went to Burnham to be with him."

"What happened?"

"You know what happened. You've read my novel, and my poems," Miranda said. "I ran away. I wanted to write and I had to be free to do that. He wanted me to marry him, to give up my dreams and take on his, to be his wife and the mother of his children, to spend all my time taking care of him. I chose to live for myself. To be a poet."

She had made her choice, and that was all there was to be said, Miranda thought. She knew that Sarah, unlike the others before her, would not doubt the necessity, would not plead for her own future by demanding, "Why couldn't you have both? Can't poets marry? Not all men are like that — why should we have to choose?"

Sarah only said, "Do you ever think about it? Do you ever wonder how it might have been if you'd stayed, if you'd never left Burnham?"

Miranda looked out the window at the highway sign. Five miles to Burnham.

"Yes," she said. "Of course I do. 'No Regrets' — that's what the poem is all about."

Outside already were the first signs of civilization: billboards advertising restaurants and motels. There, where Miranda remembered green fields and grazing cattle, she saw hard white concrete glittering in the sun,

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glass storefronts and evergreen shrubs in stone troughs, a rustic wooden sign proclaiming CEDAR CROSS VILLAGE.

And then they were in the town. But it wasn't the sleepy, rural village Miranda remembered — it might almost have been a city, or at least a prosperous suburb of Houston or Dallas. The road they were on had been widened to five lanes, (a center lane for turning) and on either side stretched restaurants, supermarkets, office buildings, and clusters of shops — all looking clean, shiny, and new.

Miranda held on to her astonishment. Of course it had changed. Even Burnham had marched into the present along with the rest of the world. The old steak house — once the only real restaurant in town — was a familiar landmark with its rough-hewn limestone walls and circling neon wagon-wheel sign, but sharing a parking lot with it now were a Chinese restaurant and a Baskin-Robbins.

"Same old dump," said Sarah, sighing.

"You should have seen it fifteen years ago," Miranda said. "I see you've got a movie theater now."

"Oh, that's the Twin. They show real junk there. The one I like is on the other side of campus — they get in some good foreign films. But there were some threats that the city council might force them to close down after they screened *In the Realm of the Senses*. I never saw it — one showing and boom! There went the print. Still, I guess it could be worse."

"It could be worse," Miranda agreed. "In my day — listen to me, I sound ancient! — in my day, young lady, we had to drive to Houston if we wanted to see a movie, and forget that pornographic stuff, because it didn't exist in this state." She caught sight of a sign advertising a wet T-shirt contest. "Is that a bar? You mean this isn't a dry county anymore? Movies, booze — what more could you want?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Sarah. "Sophistication, intellectual conversation, enlightenment, live theater, a decent local newspaper, better bookstores, fewer rednecks."

"You're talking about Paradise, kid. People in New York want all that, too." Then the tension inside her squeezed her throat shut as the familiar ugly buildings and beautiful landscaping of the campus came into view. This was the part of town she knew best; these the visual images that came to mind when she thought of Burnham, and fifteen years and a few extra buildings couldn't hide or change it. The squat concrete blocks surrounded by brilliantly green grass and old oak trees hung with Spanish moss, the auditorium that looked like a flying saucer, the tacky jumble of stores and fast-food joints that made up "the Strip" — then past the ugly barracks of married student housing, still there although Miranda recalled they had been called "temporary"

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from the time they were erected, twenty years before.

As if tracing the path of Miranda's memory to its inevitable conclusion, Sarah turned down a side road, and then turned again onto Goddard Lane. It was all so familiar that it did not seem odd when Sarah turned in at the driveway of the corner house and switched off the engine.

"Here we are," she said.

The house itself was still the same, although the pecan trees around it were larger and leafier, and the deep-set porch, always its most attractive feature, now boasted the wooden bench-swing that Miranda and Richard had never been able to afford. It was a single-story wooden house, painted gray with white trim, a comfortable, old, welcoming home.

Feeling a prickle of unease, Miranda looked at the smiling girl beside her. "How did you know?"

"This is where you're going to be living," Sarah said.

The unease changed to fear. It wasn't a joke. Miranda reached to touch the door handle, ready to bolt, and turned to Sarah sharply. "Who told you to bring me here? Tell me the truth."

Sarah drew back. "What's wrong? It's all yours — the whole house. It's really great, I've been inside."

"Is this where all the visiting lecturers stay?"

"I don't know. The university owns it, but there are also guest quarters attached to a couple of the dorms. This is just as close to campus, and it's a whole house. Of course, if you don't like the house, I guess—"

"Oh, I like the house," Miranda said. She detected no dishonesty in Sarah, and knew her own reaction must have seemed odd. It must be coincidence. It was only a house. "I've always liked it. It was hard to walk away from it fourteen years ago, very hard." She watched the understanding appear in Sarah's eyes. "I sure never thought I'd come back." She laughed ruefully. "I suppose, like this, it's all right. Victory, not retreat. Come on, show me around. I want to see if it has changed as much as I have."

The first thing she noticed as she came through the door was the smell. Even after fourteen years of different occupants, different furniture, fresh coats of paint and floor polish, the house retained its own, faint, distinctive scent. Despite her unease, the recognition stirred her. It was like coming home.

She walked slowly, quietly through the house, as if afraid of disturbing someone. The furniture was all new and strange to her, but that wasn't important. The basics remained the same. The walls were still a pinkish shade of white, the floors were still bare, polished boards gleaming golden brown between the scattered rugs. More than that, the shape and size of the building was what she remem-

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bered, what had always impressed her most. A series of high, spacious, airy rooms, living room opening into dining room opening into kitchen. In contrast, behind them, was what she thought of as the spine of the house, the dark hallway that twisted from the front door to the back, connecting the three bedrooms on the east side with the three living rooms on the west side of the house. The hallway reminded Miranda of a secret passage. It seemed to her that it ran parallel to, but separate from, the real life of the house. It was the surprise hidden behind those so-open rooms, concealing and revealing. It had stirred the child in Richard, Miranda recalled. He loved to play impromptu games of hide-and-seek, sometimes startling, sometimes annoying, sometimes delighting her with his ability to keep out of sight, ducking from room to room, into the hall and out of it again, evading her pursuit.

"Is it the way you remember it?"

Sarah's voice startled her, coming from behind. Hadn't she just heard footsteps ahead, echoing down the hall from the kitchen? A trick of acoustics, Miranda decided.

She hadn't thought of Richard in years, but now, in this house. . . .

"Have you heard of someone named Richard Terrell?" she asked Sarah.

"Dr. Terrell? Sure, I take his course. Is he the one who invited you to teach at Burnham?"

Of course he was. His name had never been mentioned in correspondence — someone else was the head of the English department — but of course. Miranda was frozen by the sudden certainty that she had walked into a trap. Richard's trap. He had waited for fourteen years, and now she couldn't move as she felt the house close in on her, and knew she had only dreamed of escaping. She had never really left.

Sarah was talking — something about bus schedules and telephone books and groceries. Miranda could hardly hear her. She was struggling, running around inside her head like a rat in a maze, unable to see the exit. She'd signed a contract. She was stuck here. She could run away, hitch to Houston and use her return ticket to fly home tonight. But she'd sublet her apartment — she had no home. She had friends she could stay with in New Orleans — or Denver — she could fly anywhere in the world, there was no one to stop her. She'd done it before. She would survive, get a job as a waitress and write in her spare time. The sales, the readings would come. It would be tough, but she could manage—

"Miss Ackerman? Is there anything else? I mean, do you want me to drive you somewhere? Or stay here and help you unpack?"

Sarah's fresh young face brought her back to reality. Yes, of course she

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could leave. But she didn't have to. There was no trap. The past fourteen years were no dream. She wasn't an untried girl anymore. She was Miranda Ackerman, the visiting poet. She had escaped from Burnham and returned to tell the tale.

"No, thank you, Sarah," she said. "You've been very helpful. I'll be all right now. I think I'll just spend the evening unpacking and get myself settled in."

But when Sarah had gone and Miranda began unpacking, she found herself with a problem. The small bedroom at the back of the house, opposite the kitchen, had been furnished as a study with desk, filing cabinet, and bookshelves. It was obviously intended for her use. And yet she froze in the doorway, an intruder, unable to enter, seeing Richard there working at the table.

The old card table had been folded up and taken away long ago, along with Richard's books and files. Miranda forced herself to enter, to sit in the black office chair, to add her own books to the few standard reference works already on the shelves.

The sound of footsteps in the hall made her whirl around. She held her breath, listening, then called, "Sarah, is that you?"

No reply, but someone might be standing in the hall, listening to her, perhaps hiding a smile.

"Sarah?"

There was no one when she leaned into the hall, but she walked down the corridor to check. In the kitchen she stood very still, listening, straining her ears against the silence until it ceased to be silence and fragmented into sound: voices from a distant room.

The feeling that she was not alone in the house did not leave her, and when she finally fell into bed, exhausted and confused by the events of the day, it was to the remembered sound of Richard's voice.

"Miranda," he said. "You . . . tell . . . I'll . . . later . . . when . . . you . . . never . . . why . . . who . . . where. . . ."

The words jangled and reverberated within the walls of the house, within the walls of her skull, but she couldn't understand what he was trying to tell her, where or why he was hiding, until at last she slept.

The next day, Miranda had to face Burnham, to come to terms with it as her home for the next year. She longed to be able to set out in the spirit of adventure, to discover the town as she had discovered others, but that was impossible. There was nothing new for her imagination to work on: Burnham, for her, had already been invented. The many changes of the past fourteen years were superficial. They did not alter the basic character of the town any more than the new furniture had her

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old house. Recollections snagged her and old emotions threatened to trip her up wherever she walked. There, on that bench beneath one of the campus oaks, Richard had proposed to her. And on that corner she had stood weeping with fury, refusing to go home to him. The old student union was gone, replaced by a new building, but Miranda remembered hours spent in the coffee bar and the game room on that site.

The head of the English department, a distracted, straw-colored man called Coker, gave her a stack of forms to read and took her to lunch at the Faculty Club. She was too tense to eat much, worried that Richard was around and might see her before she saw him.

"What about the rest of the staff?" she asked.

"Good people," said Coker automatically. "Good people. You'll meet them tonight. Party at my house. BYOB. Well, no, you don't have to — you're guest of honor, at least this time. We're very informal around here, you'll find. Some of the students will be there, too. Good chance for you to meet them before classes start."

Waiting, she was strung taut. She was annoyed with herself for worrying, for being obsessed with an old boyfriend, a man she hadn't seen for fourteen years. She had hoped that seeing him would break the spell. On her way to the party, she tried on attitudes as if they were dresses, and prepared herself with a few witty lines.

She tried to take in the whole room at a glance, her nerves quivering, her ears fine-tuned to pick up the faintest sound of his voice amid the room full of conversation. She peered closely at strangers, barely registering their names as she tried to find some resemblence to the man she had once known, as she tried to imagine how greatly he might have changed in fourteen years. Would he be bald, fat, bearded — homosexual?

When it grew later and the guests began to leave, Miranda finally had to ask Coker.

"Terrell? Oh, yeah, Emily said he'd phoned — said he was real sorry he couldn't come, but one of his kids was sick, his daughter had a fever and he didn't like to leave her."

His daughter. The word sliced through her. So Richard had children. Of course he did. Why should that thought disturb her? Why was it so painful? It felt like jealousy — and she didn't like to think about that.

She found the porch light shining when she went home, just as if someone had left it on for her. She had no memory of having turned it on herself, and when she entered the house, she had the strong impression that someone had just slipped down the hall ahead of her.

She went through every room in the house, turning on all the lights,

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but found no one.

"Miranda. . . ."

His voice shivered the air, sent a chill down her spine. "Richard, damn you, show yourself!" she called, and ran, ducking in and out of the hall, weaving as complex and rapid a path as she could, but she couldn't catch him. She couldn't even glimpse him, although she heard his laughter, very close.

"Damn you," she muttered. She stopped, and listened to the thudding of her own heart, realizing she was drunk. There was no one in the house. The doors were locked, the windows closed. Central air-conditioning had been installed since her day, so she switched it on and turned off all the lights and went to bed.

She slept badly. It was to be expected. The first few nights in a strange bed were always difficult. That this was a familiar house only added to the problem. Instead of waking disoriented, as she usually did, she woke knowing exactly where she was, puzzled by the fact that she was alone. She should be used to sleeping alone by now — she hadn't had a steady boyfriend in more than two years. Whom was she reaching for, whose absence surprised her into wakefulness time and again when her arms closed on emptiness? She knew, and tried to pretend she didn't.

The last time she woke, the bedside clock said seven. It was earlier than she usually rose, but it was morning, and she was glad to end her battle with sleep. For a while she simply lay in bed listening to the sounds of the house, listening to voices from another room.

It took some time for her to register that something was wrong. She was so accustomed to life in rented rooms, in cheap, thin-walled apartments where the sounds of other lives provided counterpart to her own, that she did not at first remember that she was in a house now. And alone. Then the blood pounded so hard in her ears that she couldn't hear the voices.

An automatic clock-radio, she thought. Or an open window, children playing on the lawn. She pulled on her robe and went into the hall. Above the soft hiss of the air-conditioning, she heard two voices, not loud, but clearly coming from the other bedroom. A man's voice, and a child's. The man speaking softly, the child laughing with pleasure.

Some mistake. A man and a child in her house? Nothing to fear, only some mistake.

"Excuse me—"

Her voice sounded harsh in the empty room. Sunlight came through the glass. Dust motes rose from the golden floor. The room was empty. The guest room. Once her workroom, it would have been the nursery if she'd married Richard and had his child.

That thought carried with it a

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sense of loss so powerful that it frightened her more than the imaginary voices. Miranda turned blindly from the emptiness and walked.

The smell of coffee tickled her nose and drew her on, and when she came to the doorway of the kitchen, she smiled at the common, everyday sight of Richard tending the bubbling percolator.

Then she grabbed the doorframe to steady herself, and Richard was gone as if he had never been. But the fragrance lingered, teasing her with its insubstantial reality.

She marched across the checkered linoleum floor, but the stove was cold, and the percolator did not exist. She had been imagining things, reliving the past. She had, in other words, seen a ghost.

Miranda went through the motions of preparing a cup of instant coffee, moving stiffly and cautiously, afraid of colliding with the invisible. Hairs prickled at the back of her neck, and she stared fixedly at her own hands as she worked, trying not to see the movements that teased at the corners of her sight. She bore her cup of coffee back to bed, gliding down the hall with eyes fixed straight ahead, refusing to be tempted by visions.

But by the time she had finished drinking her coffee, sitting cozy in bed and watching the room fill up with sunlight, Miranda was no longer afraid. Instead, she was interested, and rather pleased with herself. It wasn't everyone who could see ghosts, after all. It was a gift, like poetry. No ghastly spirits haunted her —it was her own past. Miranda did not usually think of herself as having a past. She was still young, an itinerant poet of no fixed address, and a past was something that she would acquire with age, like a house, a husband, children. . . .

Miranda looked at her hands, wondering if they were the hands of a young woman. It wasn't too late, was it? In four years she would be forty. She had never, despite all the speeches she'd made, resolutely turned away from the possibility of a husband, even children. She had not thought, when she ran away from Richard and what he offered, that she was making the choice for all eternity. Did she really want to be single all her life? Would the day ever come when she admitted it was too late? And would she know, then, that she had made a mistake?

She got up and went down the hall to her office. As an exercise, a beginning in a new place, Miranda set herself to write a poem about the house. The words came quickly, and she took it down like dictation. But when she had finished a draft, she frowned in dismay. It was too easy; it was too familiar. Hadn't she written this before? It wasn't very good, in any case. She crumpled the paper in her hand and threw the ball at the wastebasket just as a wave of déjà

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vu made her dizzy.

Her first class, that afternoon , restored her self-esteem. The students were bright, eager, interested, and impressed to be in the presence of Miranda Ackerman. Afterward, almost singing, she went along to the English department, and there was Richard, leaning against a wall.

For a moment she stared and said nothing, taking him for his ghost. Then he shifted, and grinned, and said, "Hello, Miranda. I'm sorry I had to miss your party."

She saw then that he had put on weight, and his hair was cut short. He had changed in many small ways, but he was the same and she knew him. "It's nice to see you again."

"You, too. I thought maybe, if you have some time, we could have a cup of coffee together? Just chat? I have a class an hour from now, but if you're free — would that be O.K.?"

She realized he was nervous, and suddenly everything was easy. She smiled. "Yes, I'd like that."

He took her, apologizing, to the Faculty Club, and Miranda exerted herself to be as charming and friendly to him as she would have been to any agreeable stranger. The past was between them like a pane of glass. It kept them apart, but it allowed them to see each other.

"You'll have to come over for dinner one evening," he said.

"Yes, I'd like that." It was true. This man was a stranger to her, and it might be possible to become his friend. "Where do you live?"

"Oh, not far from you, on the corner of Live Oak and Glen Valley, just a few blocks north of Goddard—" he stopped, looking uncomfortable, and Miranda remembered her earlier suspicions.

"You know where I'm living."

She knew that guilty expression. "Look, please don't think I had anything to do with it—"

"Why should I think that?"

"The housing department made all the arrangements. They don't consult the English department. There's no way I could— honestly, you can't think—"

The pane of glass was gone; he was too close. Miranda said sharply, "Of course I don't think you had anything to do with where I live. Why should you? It was just a funny coincidence — like my coming back to Burnham at all. I'm not the person I was when I left here, and neither are you."

"Then you don't mind living there?"

"Why should I?"

He shrugged, not meeting her challenge. "It was a long time ago."

He couldn't be mourning her still. He was married now, he had children. Miranda thought of how much stronger unhappy memories were than happy ones. Ghosts were traditionally unhappy. On impulse she said,

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"How long did you live in that house after I left?"

He sighed, giving in. "Three years."

"Alone?"

Richard nodded. "Except for the ghosts."

"Ghosts!" She felt betrayed. She'd thought they were *her* ghosts.

He gave her a thoughtful look. "In a manner of speaking. I was haunted by you after you went away. I'd hear your voice in another room, or your footsteps down the hall. When I went to look, I'd find no one. In a way I couldn't believe you'd gone. The house never felt empty. Sometimes I'd catch glimpses of you smiling at me from across the room, or walking past the bedroom door."

Miranda shivered. "What do you mean? Do you mean you couldn't stop thinking about me, or do you mean my ghost was actually there in the house?"

"Is there a difference? Does it matter? I don't know if anyone else could have seen you, because I led a pretty reclusive life and there was hardly ever anyone else in the house. I never thought I was imagining it — it was too real. Even though I knew you'd left, it was as if a part of you stayed behind, because I needed you. Why? Have you seen anything since you've been back?"

Miranda smiled and drew back, shaking her head. "You expect me to see my own ghost?"

"I guess not . . but you might see mine."

She lost her smile. "Is that why you had me put in that house? To haunt me?"

Richard looked at his watch. "I told you, I didn't have anything to do with where they put you. And I have a class now; I've got to go."

Now he was running, she thought, just as *she* had always run rather than argue with him. She stood up as he did and said, "I'd like to forget the past and start over again with you, Richard. Can't you?"

He smiled at her. "I already have." The pane of glass was back, solidly in place between them.

Miranda didn't expect to see the ghost again. Seeing Richard had been an exorcism, she thought. His present self drove out the past, and she could no longer believe in the Richard of fourteen years ago. But later that day, sitting at her desk, writing in her journal, Miranda felt herself being watched. When she looked around, she heard faint sounds outside, as if someone had scurried away.

Trying to remember if she had locked the door behind her, Miranda rose, calling, "Is someone there?"

As she ducked into the hall, she saw a flash of color as someone ducked into the dining room. Her heart thumped and she ran forward. The dining room was empty when

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she got there, and so, too, the living room. But there was someone in the house. Someone was playing with her.

After a moment's thought, she let herself collapse into a deep, padded chair in the living room, one that commanded a view of the door into the hall as well as the door into the dining room.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," she called above the noise of her own heart. Her fingers dug grooves in the chair arms as she looked tensely back and forth.

From the hall a faint sound: shoes squeaking on polished boards. And then, quite distinctly, a giggle. While Miranda held her breath, a little girl peeped shyly around the door from the hallway. She was tiny, surely no more than three or four years old, with sparkling gray eyes and brown hair pulled tightly into two stubby pigtails.

Miranda smiled and let out her breath in relief, but before she could say a word, the little girl had vanished.

Miranda jumped up and ran into the hall to look for her, but she already know it was hopeless. The girl had not run away; she had disappeared. The house was empty.

The house was haunted. She wasn't alone. Miranda began to shake, no longer charmed by the idea of her own private ghosts. There were others in the house, invisible, insubstantial people leading lives parallel to her own, in other times. Other times just as real as this present in which she was anchored. Perhaps it was the same everywhere, invisible crowds of people moving through one another unknowing, but here in this house the veil of time that should have kept things separate had torn. Things slipped through, people. Miranda feared a collision.

Claustrophobic, oppressed by other lives, Miranda left the house, needing an escape from all the invisible people trapped within the walls of her house. It was time for dinner, so she went to a sandwich bar near campus, one that Sarah had told her was a preferred student hangout, and brooded over her pastrami-on-rye.

Could anyone else see the ghosts? She thought of Richard, but then dismissed him. He had been speaking in metaphor, talking about memory and regrets. She didn't like the idea that she and Richard shared this special sensitivity; she preferred to believe seeing ghosts was her own individual talent.

She looked around the bar at students eating, drinking, talking together and playing video games, and realized that she was the oldest person there by at least fifteen years. She felt a surge of disappointment and then annoyance: first at Sarah for recommending this as a good place to meet people, and then at herself for expecting something else. People her age didn't hang around in student snack bars. She still thought of herself as

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young, a girl, and gravitated to student hangouts from long habit. But the slim, hard bodies and blank faces around her made her feel ancient. She realized she had come looking for someone, hoping she wouldn't have to go home tonight. But there was nothing here for her: she was too old, and not old enough, to have a liking for boys.

So she went back to her haunted house. Walking through the warm, quiet evening, Miranda had time to reflect. The ghosts she had seen were not threatening — perhaps they even had something to offer. She wondered how many ghosts there were, how many former residents lingered on in spirit, and was tempted by the idea of getting to know them all, of becoming the woman who lived with ghosts.

Turning down Goddard Lane, Miranda walked more quickly, eager to get home. She saw the house ahead, picked out of the darkness by the lights shining from the windows, and she stopped.

It had not been dark when she left the house. She was certain she had turned on no lights. Walking again, she was more cautious, and left the sidewalk to approach the house from an angle, from the side, all the while staring at the bright squares of the windows.

A figure appeared like an image cast upon a screen: a man in profile. It was Richard.

Not her own, remembered, long-haired boyfriend, but short-haired Dr. Richard Terrell of the English department. Still in shock, Miranda stared. Something moved past another window, and then the child appeared.

Richard knelt: Miranda saw his head close to the child's, nose to nose. She could imagine the little girl's giggling, pleased by her father's attention.

Richard and his daughter, playing at being ghosts.

Miranda began stalking toward the house, but then her fury turned her around. She would not walk into his trap, not this time. He was too good at playing hide-and-seek in her house.

No. She knew where he lived; she would go and wait for him. Let him walk into *her* trap.

"Does your wife know where you are?" she muttered, and grinning, broke into a run.

When she reached the corner of Live Oak and Glen Valley, she was out of breath and starting to waver in her determination. She had no idea what she would say when Richard's wife answered the door.

But Richard's wife did not answer the door — Richard did. Miranda stared at him. Even if he'd had a car waiting, even if he leaped into it seconds after she'd started running, how could he have arrived without passing her, without her seeing him?

"Miranda! What a surprise. Please come in." He stepped back, but she didn't move.

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"How did you get here so fast?"

"What do you mean?".

"You know what I mean! From my house!"

He frowned. "I've been here all evening."

"You were in my house not twenty minutes ago, with your daughter."

"My daughter is in bed. She has chicken pox. Look, Miranda . . ."

"Richard, I saw you! In my house, with a little girl, not ten minutes ago. I saw you there as plainly as I see you now. I'm not buying the haunted house story. It was you."

"You'd better come in."

As Miranda entered, a slim, dark-haired woman came into the hall.

"This is my wife," Richard said. "Doris, this is Miranda Ackerman, the visiting poet."

"Oh, yes, of course! How nice to meet you. I'm sorry we couldn't come to the party, only Beth had a raging fever and neither of us liked to leave. Richard didn't tell me you were coming tonight."

"I'm glad to meet you," Miranda said, beginning to feel embarrassed. "Richard wasn't expecting me — I just dropped by."

"We have something to talk over," Richard said to his wife. "I thought I'd take her into my study. Maybe you could join us a little later with some coffee?"

He led Miranda into a room comfortably filled with books, showed her to a chair, and closed the door. "Now, what's the problem?"

"You tell me."

They stared at each other. Miranda said, "I saw you in my house, Richard."

He shook his head.

"I know what I saw."

"You can ask Dorie. I haven't been out all evening. And I haven't been in the house on Goddard Lane for at least ten years. You saw my ghost."

"And the ghost of your daughter?" she asked sarcastically.

He gave her a level look. "*Our* daughter. The child you never had."

A chill went down her spine. "Don't be ridiculous. We never had a child. Even if I'm seeing apparitions of the past, I couldn't see someone who never existed."

"You were pregnant when you left me. You think I don't know? You went away to have an abortion. You knew that if you had stayed and told me, I wouldn't have let you. I'd have talked you into marrying me, and having the child."

"You're crazy. I didn't need a reason like that to leave you. I left you because I was miserable. I hated living in Burnham, I had to escape, I had to write my poems—"

"Like 'No Regrets,'" he said. "That's about deciding to have the abortion, and leaving me."

"Oh, yes, I suppose you think all my poems are about you! The great literary scholar, figuring me out from my poems. What an ego!"

"It was nearly fourteen years ago.

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It's in the past. You don't have to justify yourself to me now. Surely you can admit that you had an abortion rather than have our child?"

"It was fourteen years ago, yes, so why does it matter to you? Why do you need me to confess? Why dig it up?"

He sighed and sank back in his chair, running a hand through his hair absently, watching her as if he really knew her, the way a father knows a stubborn child.

"Of course it still matters," he said quietly. "Everything matters, always. You're the one who has dug it up. You're the one seeing ghosts."

She felt herself giving in. She had always given in, or run away from him. He still had that power over her — and how she resented it — to make her feel childish and in the wrong.

"All right," she said. "Maybe I had an abortion — but why should I see a four-year-old child? How can I see the ghost of someone who was never born?"

"I'll tell you what I think," he said. "Those ghosts are fragments of the past, but not the past *we* know. Of another, possible past, one that might have happened as easily as what we actually remember. The past I wanted — what would have happened if you hadn't left me."

He stopped her protest with a look and went on. "After you left, all I could think about was you, and what I'd lost, and whether or not you might come back, and what would have happened if I'd done things differently, if I'd been able to talk you into staying.

"I became obsessed. I suppose, in a way, I went a little crazy. I started seeing you. I began living in an alternate reality, a kind of waking dream. In it, you'd never left. You married me and had our baby. You settled down to life in Burnham at last, and you stopped complaining."

"Oh, terrific. I suppose I gave up writing poetry, too?"

"Of course not. I don't know why you ever thought I wanted that. I was proud of you, always. You wrote — motherhood seemed to release new wells of creativity in you. You learned how to use your time, becoming far more disciplined. You won a prize, which included publication of your first book. You dedicated the collection to me and to our daughter, Helen."

"That's crazy!" Miranda said, but she recognized what he was doing. It had been a game with them, once. They made up stories about their neighbors, about strangers glimpsed on the street or in the news, great epics of "What would have happened if . . ." they'd never met, or their parents had led different lives. She had enjoyed it because she'd been very good at it. Better than Richard, which was the problem. It had become a competition he had to win — and to make him happy, she had agreed with him, repressed or altered her own

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best flights of fancy.

"Maybe," said Richard. "Maybe I was crazy. But maybe I was seeing another kind of truth. I know I believed it then, and it helped me survive. The amazing thing is that I had this rich, detailed fantasy life going on, and yet I continued to function in the real world. I got to work on time; I went to class and kept my grades up; I wrote my papers, did research, and paid the bills. It was almost as if what I imagined were true, that I *did* have a loving wife who supported me by keeping my spirits high and making sure I ate well, keeping me from slacking, never doubting—"

"I suppose I typed your papers, too."

He smile fondly. "Well, yes, you did, although how you managed to fit it in with looking after the house, caring for the baby, cooking meals, and writing poems I never could work out."

"Richard, honestly! You typed those papers yourself. There was no baby — there was no wife! You sound as if you believed it really happened!"

He shrugged. "For me, it did. I'm just telling you what I remember."

"You're remembering things that happened only inside your head."

"Ah, no. They happened inside that house. You've proved that, by seeing the ghosts yourself. How could you see my fantasies? They must have some sort of objective reality."

"I don't believe it. Are you saying that all my memories are wrong? That the past fourteen years, and all I've got to show for them, never happened?"

"Don't look at me like that, Miranda." That chiding, rational voice compelled her belief, and infuriated her. Why should his dreams be truer than her own? "Of course I'm not saying that the past fourteen years aren't real. You had an abortion, you built up your career as a poet; I met Dorie, got married, had two kids. . . . That's history. But there's another history — lots of other histories of things that might have happened. Alternate worlds, other realities. You think that after you left me, I was spinning fantasies in my head. But I think I was catching glimpses of another line of probability, of a "what if" world, another time-line running parallel to this one, in which you didn't leave me.

"There could be an infinite number of these probability worlds running parallel to our own, each one the result of some small change in history, even personal histories. For every choice made, another branches away, leading to a whole new set of decisions, a new series of alternate histories. One of these branching points came when you got pregnant. In one world you ran away and got an abortion. In another world you told me about it and stayed to bear our child. Those two worlds are so close

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they actually touch in the house on Goddard Lane. And something — my misery, my obsession with you, my refusal to accept reality — made me especially sensitive so that I could see and hear bits of that other world. At times I merged with my other self and experienced my life as it would have been if you'd stayed. You know it's true — you've heard the voices; you've seen the child."

Maybe he was just trying to upset her; maybe it was real to him. It's just the old game again, Miranda told herself. She had her own life now, and nothing he could say would change that. She should say good night and leave.

But she had run away from him in the past because she couldn't stand up to him. She was older now, and stronger, and there were old scores to settle. She wanted to win this game, to make him believe in *her* story.

"All right," she said. "Let's say there are alternate worlds. Let's say we've both glimpsed another timeline in that house.

"Yes, I was pregnant when I left you, and yes, I had an abortion. I knew if I told you, you'd have talked me out of it. You always wore me down. I did love you, but I couldn't stay in Burnham and have a baby. So I had to sneak away.

"If there are alternate worlds, there must be one where you found out I was pregnant and talked me into marrying you. Maybe I had a daughter, and we named her Helen, after my mother."

She drew a deep breath, looking at his self-satisfied smile. "But everything else you say is wrong, wrong, wrong. You had no idea what was going on in my mind, what I was feeling, or what it would have done to me to stay. All that stuff about our happy marriage — you just made that up to ease your conscience. You'd have loved to have me typing your papers and cooking your meals, but I would have hated it."

"Having a baby changed you," he said. "Once you realized it was what you really wanted—"

Miranda clung to the thread, fighting off his smugness with the passion of knowledge.

"Of course it changed me! But it didn't turn me into a good little housewife without a brain. I loved my baby, no doubt about it; loved her even before she was born. I never regretted having her, not even when I lost the inclination to write. I was too tired to write, but giving up poetry for my own baby didn't seem like such a great expense.

"I couldn't resent *her* for the way I'd changed. So I resented you. I blamed you, because you didn't understand. You thought it should be enough for me to be your wife and Helen's mother. You patronized me, offering to get up early to look after Helen so I could write, offering to

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make dinner. It was my own fault if I didn't write — after all, I was home all day with nothing to do but cook and wash and clean and type your papers — how long could it take to write eight or nine lines?

"You didn't understand, so I hated you, and you never noticed. In your eyes, I was happy and fulfilled, because I didn't scream. Even after three years, when I'd written nothing, you still told people that your wife wrote poetry — it was a nice hobby."

Her arms ached. Miranda realized her fists were clenched, her whole body ready to fight. She trembled with the effort of restraining herself. Richard watched her, eyes wary and mouth ungiving as he prepared his defense. But there could be no defense. Miranda knew that she was telling the truth, the only truth there was.

"Eventually I left you. Of course I did! You wanted another child, another stone to weigh me down and keep me in my place. After you made me get my IUD removed — I'm sure you couldn't really feel it — I went on the Pill, even though I knew it was bad for me. I knew you'd sabotage me if you could. I looked around for another lover, someone to rescue me, but in the end I just left, taking Helen.

"I was a woman of thirty burdened with a child, without a man, without a job, without skills or talent, a failed poet, useless. Gradually I realized how unfair it was to blame you for all that — no one really stopped me writing but myself. I could blame myself for not leaving you sooner, but then I wouldn't have had Helen. It was the hardest thing in the world, to start writing again, without hope or encouragement."

"I always encouraged you," Richard said.

"I know you did," she agreed dully. She wondered why it hurt to look at his gentle, bland, well-fed face. She had not loved him for many years. "And you gave me money, more than just child support. Most men wouldn't." She stopped, confused. When had he ever given her money? But he was nodding, agreeing. Yes, he was a good man. He'd done all he could.

"Don't look so sad," he said. "You're happy now, aren't you? You're doing what you want to do. You're an established poet, with books to your name and good reviews, and you make your living with the lecture circuit and teaching courses like this one."

He smiled, encouragingly, and suddenly she knew that she owed her year at Burnham to Richard. He had fixed it. Not a trap, as she had first thought, but a way of soothing his guilty conscience, of putting her further in his debt.

When at last she could speak around the anger in her throat, she said, "I never asked for your help, you know. I didn't *need* your help."

There was a sudden, soft flurry of knocks at the door, and then it flew

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open and in came a little girl, giggling. She was about five or six years old, with a mass of dark curls and a pretty, flushed face. She wore pajamas.

"The dreams won't let me sleep," she said. Miranda saw her resemblence to Richard's dark-haired wife. Then she looked at Richard and saw his love for the child, and felt her anger drain away.

Richard left his chair to scoop the little girl into his arms and nuzzle her neck, making her squeal with delight.

Watching, Miranda felt bereft. She had denied Richard this joy; she had denied herself. But this was not the only possible world. She rose, and Richard looked at her, across the body of his child.

"I'll put Miss Wiggles here back to bed," he said. "I'll ask Doris to make us some coffee. You will stay, won't you?"

She suspected he had already forgotten their conversation, drawn back into his own world by the demands of his real daughter. She said, "You can't measure books against lives."

He frowned. Did he disagree, or hadn't he understood? "Just wait," he said. "I won't be long."

As he went out the door, Miranda began counting. When she reached ten, she left the house and went back into the night.

An infinity of possible worlds whirled around her head, as bright and distant as stars. If there were two different lines of probability, there were a hundred, a million. For every word spoken. For every choice, every chance. Richard's happy marriage to her just as possible as her desertion of him, the mother as real as the poet.

Miranda stopped on a corner, confused. Her usual sense of direction had deserted her, and she couldn't remember which way to turn. Where did she live? Goddard Lane? But that had been years and years ago.

She walked on. She could be only what she imagined, and for years Miranda had imagined herself a loner, a drifter, a failure at relationships who made up her life in words.

She knew what her life would have been if she'd stayed with Richard — wrong, a failure, a trap. She knew it just as if it had actually happened. And perhaps it had.

No regrets, she thought, meaning the opposite. Because there were always regrets, always second thoughts and questions. But you couldn't travel two roads at the same time, and each road took you farther away. You tried, as you traveled, not to think about what might have been. You tried not to hear ghosts calling your name.

There was her house. The living room curtains had been drawn, so only a soft glow of light showed. The porch light had been turned on to welcome her home. Miranda stared up at it from the street.

I could run away, she thought,
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Juleen Brantingham ("Felly," December 1981) offers a new story about a group of colonists on a planet called Goodhope. The survey report had said that the plant and animal life was safe to eat . . . if, as it turned out, it didn't kill them first. And that was only the beginning of their problems.

The Haunting of Goodhope

BY
JULEEN BRANTINGHAM

Doro could see and hear and smell the hate. It glared at her from the red eyes of a rabbitlike creature skulking behind a clump of winegrass, echoed in the startled scream of a kubird that threw itself into the air at her approach, bubbled up with the stench of rot from a swampy spot near the river crossing. It was unforgiving, unending hate, aimed at the destruction of the colonists on the planet Goodhope, all the more frightening because none of the creatures that displayed it could be called intelligent.

She raised the torch in her left hand, scanning the ground ahead of her for Perri's footprints. She didn't really expect to find her sister — not in time, not still breathing. The only way to survive outside the stockade and caves that were their last refuge was to be alert, quick to respond to every sound, every movement. As far as she knew, Perri wasn't even carrying a weapon. But Doro had to try; for what she'd done to Perri, she owed her that.

Something caught her eye and she knelt. Clamping the heat pistol between her thigh and her stomach, she touched some freshly crushed leaves, traced the partial print of a shoe. Perri was close. Doro thought about calling to her, then decided against it. Sometimes just the sound of a human voice could trigger an attack.

Perri probably wouldn't answer anyway; she was lost in a dream world. Ghosts, for God's sake. All they needed now was for the few of them remaining to start seeing ghosts. And talking to them. That would finish them off quick.

Might be merciful at that. They'd been here for ten years now, ten years

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of dying, with never a sign that Earth remembered they were here. The promised resupply ships sure as hell weren't going to show up in the nick of time and take them back.

Perri's face had been glowing with happiness in the dim light of the cubby they shared in the larger cavern. "I saw Jimmy," she'd said. "Doro, he was standing right there where you are, just as plain as anything. He looked so happy, just like he used to be. He wanted me to go out and play with him in that little valley Carlos found — you remember? Where the silvercups grow. Where we were going to build our house" — some of the sadness crept back into her eyes — "before everything changed."

Doro remembered. That had been shortly after the colony was established, an age ago, an eon. There had been some deaths, but they hadn't yet started to occur in wholesale lots; the colonists hadn't begun to suspect the depth of the planet's hate for them. At that time, warm, sunny days were an excuse to forget about work for a while and have a picnic — with guards and weapons, yes, but those not actually on watch could still be delighted by the newly discovered wonders of the planet.

That had been a time when they could still believe Goodhope would live up to its name. Several of them had spent an afternoon in that valley, and Carlos had planned the house he would build for Perri and their children.

Carlos and Jimmy and the baby, Donna, had been killed a few nights later by creatures the colonists had thought were harmless — would have been harmless in the normal way of things. The settlement — at the time, there had been five of them — was protected by a stunfence strong enough to keep out almost everything that moved. But nothing had been set up that could have protected them from thousands of tiny burrowing frogs that swarmed up from the ground beneath them.

Doro still remembered the horror of waking up to find the squirming mass all over her body, crawling, digging into her nose and mouth and ears. Perri had been on the other side of the settlement helping a friend who was about to give birth. Neither of them had reached Perri's family in time. Some people had choked to death in their sleep; some, like baby Donna, had been too helpless to save themselves.

Perri had buried her family, wept for them, and then pulled herself together. That was when they'd realized they were in a fight for their lives; there was no time for useless mourning.

A rustle in the bushes ahead of her brought Doro's heart to her throat; reflexes tightened her finger on the triggerplate. She was aiming and firing at the body that was leaping at her head even before her brain had time to identify it as a weasel —

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what they called a weasel anyway, though it had scales, not fur, and suckers instead of claws. But it had sharp teeth, a vicious temper, and it was completely fearless. More than one hunter had been killed by a weasel with a body no thicker than a man's forearm.

This one's eyes sizzled slightly as it thumped to the ground.

Doro shook her head as she kicked the small body out of her way. She wasn't crazy enough to think the *planet* hated them, that it had that kind of awareness — that would be as bad as seeing ghosts. But the effect was the same. Goodhope had sounded like a perfect Eden to people living on overcrowded Earth, terrified by predictions of war. The survey report said that Goodhope had few large predators, a temperate climate, fertile soil, and both the plant and animal life was safe to eat. If, as it turned out, it didn't kill them first.

"Doro, is that you?" Sleepy-eyed, clutching a fistful of drooping silvercups, Perri stepped into the pool of light cast by the torch. She turned to call over her shoulder. "Jimmy, come and say hello to your Aunt Doro. She decided to join us on our picnic. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Perri, hush!" she whispered. "I think there's something out there."

Perri smiled. "Why, of course there is. It's Jimmy. I think he wants to play a game with you." She turned again. "Come here, darling. We'll play hide-and-seek after we have our picnic."

It wasn't the mad sparkle in her sister's eyes that disturbed Doro; that was torchlight, illusion. What bothered her was the feeling that Perri must know all this ghost talk was nonsense, just a game to play while she waited to die. Even as a child, Doro could never see the point of Perri's "pretend" games; Perri built dream castles and then moved into them.

But Doro couldn't have imagined Perri's kind of courage, either, if she hadn't seen examples of it every day. Her sister had remarried and had three more children after losing her first family — and saw each of them die, too. Hers was not an unusual story on Goodhope.

"Here," she said, brushing the silvercups from Perri's hand and giving her the torch to hold. "You light the way. We have to go back. You know we have to go back."

Her sister's shoulders slumped. "Jimmy?" Perri asked — pleaded, really.

"Jimmy can't be hurt by anything out here," Doro said as gently as she could. "Not now."

Perri didn't fight or argue. That had never been her way. "We'll all be safe soon. That's what he came to tell me, I think. All safe."

Doro thought she might be right: there was a kind of safety in death.

Perri didn't speak again as they made their way down the wooded hill-

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side to the river. They crossed on the makeshift bridge the settlers had never had the time or resources to replace with a more permanent structure. It creaked and groaned under their feet.

Doro was watching for possible dangers from the river, so she was startled and nearly lost her balance when something swooped silently from the sky and clawed at her hair in passing. She turned and crouched, aiming her pistol, but the thing — whatever it was — rose up and was lost against the black of the sky before she could track it. It didn't come back.

The men and some of the older children were still working by torchlight to repair the stockade wall where a herd of the grazing animals they called whistlers had damaged it. It had been a stampede, out of the darkness, unexpected because the herdbeasts were normally quiet at night. When the shouts came from the watchers on the wall, Doro had been trying to persuade Perri she hadn't really seen the ghost of her firstborn child. Doro had left her to run out and help deal with a problem she could understand, and in the confusion, after a large part of the herd had been killed, the survivors driven off, Perri had simply walked away, following her vision back to a place where she had once been happy.

For the most part, the people at the wall worked silently. At one time, they might have argued, shouted, blamed each other for not working fast enough or taking enough care. Now they were too worn-out, too discouraged even for that. There was gentleness in the way they treated each other.

As they passed through the gate, Doro saw Ben Thibodeaux, the settlement's one remaining doctor, sharpening poles to be set at the base of the wall. Pale yellow chips flew from the blade of his knife, a testament to the hours of practice he'd had at this job. He didn't look up as they went by.

Doro took her sister to the cubby they shared, little more than a shallow alcove in the larger cavern. She put Perri to bed and won a promise from one of the other woman to keep an eye on her in case she should get up to wander again. Then she went back outside to help clear the stockade wall and load the dead animals onto a low-wheeled wagon to be carried away. Wordless and numb, she worked for a couple of hours in a haze of fatigue, until she was startled by a touch on her shoulder.

"One thing, we sure won't starve to death," Thib said, gesturing toward the whistler she was trying to drag up onto the wagon. "They volunteeer for the roasting pits."

Doro wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, but it all tastes the same. Did you ever notice? The birds, the grazers, even the reptiles — all the meat tastes the

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same. It's almost enough to make me a vegetarian."

"No," Thib said innocently. "I can't say I ever noticed."

"Well, the way you slop that hot sauce of yours over everything, your taste buds are probably burned out." Even after they'd been driven to take refuge in the caves, Thib found a sunny spot where he managed to grow the special fiery-hot peppers he liked. Like all the colonists, he tried to cling to something that reminded him of home. "I wish we could have saved some of the pigs or cows," Doro said.

"We still have a few milk goats. Maybe someday —" He shook his head. "I take it you found Perri."

"Yeah, for what it's worth, I found her and brought her back." She lashed the whistler to the wagon, then tried to brush some of the filth from her hands. "Thib, she said she saw Jimmy." Doro noticed a sudden tightening of his shoulders, an uneasy sideways glance. "Perri's not the first to see a ghost, is she? I've heard — stories."

He shook his head. "No, she's not the first. If you believe even half the talk, the spirits are so thick around here we must be rubbing shoulders with them."

She made a sound of disgust. "How can sane, sensible people —"

"Sane, sensible people who are exhausted and grieving and facing certain death. Come on, Doro, it's not so hard to understand. Hope for an afterlife — even that kind — is better than no hope at all. And — I don't know — maybe it's not all nonsense. My daughter Amy —"

She glared at him as if to say, "Not you, too!"

"All I know is that Amy says her Gran'ther talks to her sometimes. Now I wouldn't put much stock in it, but the other day she called me 'Punkins.' My mother used to call me that, and I swear I've never told Amy. How could she know it if my mother's ghost didn't tell her?"

Doro had to smile at the thought of this large, deceptively grim-faced man answering to the name Punkins, but there was no hesitation in her answer. "Old letters, a diary, someone who knew you then."

"I shot all those people and buried them in the swamp before we left home. And how could I have saved old letters or a diary when I couldn't even save myself a decent pair of shoes?"

"You saved your peppers, didn't you? Seems to me we could have done without them."

He grinned. "Doro, you won't believe in ghosts until one comes up and bites you."

"I won't believe then, either. I'll know it's just my own mind playing tricks."

"All right, but where's the harm?" We're going to die anyway, he might have added.

"If it makes people commit sui-

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cide, it's harmful. Like Perri tonight, leaving the stockade to look for Jimmy. You might as well cut your throat as go walking outside after sunset without a weapon."

"Is she all right?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes, she's fine."

"Maybe you'd better bring her around in the morning. Let me have a look at her."

"All right, but why? I told you she's fine."

But Thib walked away without answering, and that worried Doro more than all the talk about ghosts.

Perri endured Thib's examination without complaint and without curiosity. After it was over, she hurried out, saying she would be late for school. They still attempted to hold classes for the little ones, mostly to keep them out from underfoot and inside the safety of the caves while the elders were working; the youngest ones had never played under an open sky.

This month it was Perri's turn as teacher — though how she could endure it after having lost all her own children, Doro didn't know. Maybe it was that added strain that had made her imagine she saw Jimmy; a mind could take only so much.

Half-dozing, Doro waited patiently for Thib. After working most of the night at the stockade, she'd managed only a few hours' sleep before being wakened by the sounds of people stirring, beginning the day's work. Caves, she decided, were very noisy places.

Thib was still in the curtained-off space at the back where he had an examination room and a long table that he referred to sarcastically as his laboratory and pharmacy. At one time, they'd had every piece of equipment, every instrument and diagnostic tool they needed to stock a couple of hospitals, but most of that had been damaged in various attacks or left behind in the final retreat to the caves. Perhaps it was just as well, because there wasn't room to spare here for anything but basic necessities.

Doro woke with a start when Thib stepped out from behind the curtain. He didn't seem pleased to find her there.

"Well, Perri's all right, isn't she?"

He didn't answer right away. He rolled down his shirt-sleeves, smoothed out the wrinkles meticulously.

"Thib, what's all this —"

His voice was harsh. "Doro, your sister is going to die soon. It — won't be an easy death."

She felt as if the air had suddenly been sucked from the room; there was a painful tightness around her chest. "What do you mean? Perri's fine — I told you that. I don't know how she got so lucky, but she wasn't attacked last night."

Thib sighed as he sat down on the

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roughly made chair next to her. He took her hand, rubbed it between his own. "Was her hair wet? Her clothes? Could she have gone swimming?"

Doro tried to remember. There was a pond where Perri had been walking, and the river, of course. "I don't know. The air was very dry. She might have, before I found her."

"Ever hear of the Kish amoeba?"

"I remember something. Vaguely. Kish was one of the organizers of this expedition. He was on a surveying trip to the lakes region when he went crazy and killed himself. Someone told me it had something to do with drinking unfiltered water."

"Swimming it it," Thib corrected her. "Good thing we prohibited swimming right from the start. We did it because of the razorfish and the jellies, but the Kish amoeba is more dangerous because you can't see it. If you get water up your nose or in an open wound —" His voice trailed away. He didn't seem to want to go on.

"Damn it, Thib!" she said.

"Sorry. It's just that I have more questions than answers. No one had had time to do any sort of research on the thing. It's just one of the minor ways this planet is trying to kill us. We've been too busy patching people together after the attacks and stampedes. The Kish amoeba infests most of the freshwater lakes and rivers. The filtration system took care of it — when we still had a filtration system."

"That's why you have us boil the water. Even the water we use for washing."

"*Especially* the water we use for washing. The acids in the human digestive system kill the Kish amoeba — and heat kills it, so even though the amoeba's a common parasite in the native life-forms, we're safe enough eating whatever life-form the amoeba's in. It causes trouble for us only when someone breaks the rules, doesn't take precautions around the water."

"So Perri must have gone swimming and picked up this thing — this Kish amoeba. You're sure?"

He nodded. "I'm sure. I did a blood test. In the human body, it must reproduce at a fantastic rate. Perri's blood is teeming with them. She's going to start showing the effects of it in a day or two, no more."

"An amoeba," Doro said. "That doesn't sound so bad. There must be a drug or something you can give her to kill them."

He turned to look at her, and she saw the answer in his eyes before he spoke. "No, there isn't. We've had a dozen cases, or suspected cases, since Kish died. No one has ever found a treatment that works."

Doro got to her feet, stumbled across the stony floor to stand staring at the wall. She took several deep breaths. Finally, she said, "All right, then, Perri is going to die soon. I knew it would happen *some*time — it

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shouldn't hurt so much. I'll stay with her every minute, make her as comfortable as I can. I'll even pretend to see her ghosts if that will make her happy."

"I'm afraid you haven't heard the worst of it yet. There's a vicious little twist to this thing."

She turned to him, eyes blazing with so much anger that he almost flinched. But her anger wasn't directed at him. "The *worst* of it?" she shouted. "For God's sake, Thib, she's suffered enough! Coming here — losing everything — her children —"

He crossed the room to put his arms around her. It was a long time before either of them could speak. Outside the arch where the doctor's cave opened into the larger one, people went on about their business as if they hadn't heard Doro shouting, hadn't heard the pain in her voice. They were all grieving, angry, fearful; the only way to cope was to try to pretend those feelings didn't exist.

"Kish didn't kill himself," Thib said, ending the silence.

"What happened to him?"

"It was on that surveying trip. One morning he just went crazy, started screaming, attacked the others in the party, and half-killed a couple of them with just his bare hands. They had to shoot him down. For some reason, they thought the suicide story would alarm people less than the truth. By then, things were looking pretty bad — it wasn't so hard to believe. Doro, there was something similar on Earth, an amoeba that attacked the brain cells. I'm afraid that's what we have here."

"You said the native animals have it. So why aren't they all dead?"

"I don't know. Maybe it reaches a kind of balance or —" He shrugged. "As I said, I have more questions than answers. All I know for sure is that it's a hell of a way to die. We'll have to confine Perri, tie her up to protect the others. I'm sorry."

"No," she said coldly, in control again. "I won't let you do that to my sister. I won't have her treated like a rabid dog. The least I can do is find some way to give her a peaceful death."

She walked away without a backward glance, so she didn't see the pity in his eyes.

Doro shifted the pack strap, trying to settle them to a more comfortable position. The wires and generator boxes of the stunfence made it an awkward load to carry. Perri was inside the cubby, checking to be sure they were leaving nothing important behind, excited as a child who'd been promised a treat. Thib leaned against the wall, his expression grim.

"Is there any way I can talk you out of this? It will be hard for the rest of us, losing you, too." His voice was low on Perri's account, but he need not have bothered; she was paying no attention to either of them.

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"In a few weeks, a few months, what will it matter? I'll just be one less person to bury," Doro said.

"You're giving up. I'm disappointed in you. I always thought you'd be one of those who held out till the last breath."

"I'm not giving up. I'm paying a debt. Perri and Carlos were getting along all right on Earth. Not great, but all right. *I* was the one who persuaded them they'd have a chance for something better if they came to Goodhope."

"If they had stayed there, they probably would have died in the war."

"What war? We don't know for sure there was a war. All we know is that the ships didn't come back. There could be a hundred other reasons —"

He only looked at her.

"Anyway, it would have been their choice. But I talked them into this — all because *I* wanted to do it and I was afraid to do it alone."

He grinned. "Five thousand of us, and you were worried about being alone?"

"Perri's the only person I've ever really been close to, the only one who'd put up with my bad temper — except you, of course. You have to put up with me because you're just as cranky as I am. But I didn't know you then. Ready, Perri?"

Her sister was smiling; some of the lines and shadows had melted from her face. "Almost," she said. "I just have to say good-bye to a couple of people." She stood on tiptoe to kiss Thib's cheek. "Say good-bye to Amy for me. Doro, I'll meet you by the gate in a few minutes."

Thib and Doro started for the arch that opened onto the hillside. "You won't last long with only a stunfence and a couple of heat pistols for protection. You must know that. And how are you going to watch Perri? You have to sleep sometime."

She shrugged. "We should have a couple of days before something gets through the fence. Perri is happy. She thinks Jimmy is out there."

They walked together in silence. Doro nodded to a group of women who were sewing and chatting as if life in the caves would go forever. But there was no farewell party to see them to the gate. The few people she had told about her journey had changed the subject quickly to something trivial. Good-byes were just too hard; better to pretend there was nothing out of the ordinary.

In an alcove near the entrance, there was a pen for the milk goats. As usual, there were a couple of children standing on the rails, petting the goats' bony heads and feeding them wisps of grass plucked from a sunny spot just outside. The children had no other pets, few games or diversions, since they could not leave the stockade, and even the hillside in front of the cave could be dangerous. The bright-eyed goats flourished from all this extra care and attention.

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Doro sniffed, then smiled.

"What?" Thib asked.

"Goat," she said. "Reminds me of home."

He snorted. "I don't think I want to know what part of the planet you came from."

When they reached the gate in the stockade wall, Thib turned to her. For a minute she was afraid he was going to kiss her, say something sentimental. She felt her courage wavering. But he only shook his head and looked away.

"I found one of the field radios and put it in Perri's pack," he said, his voice harsh. "It's wrapped in her blanket. Keep in touch, will you?" He walked away.

She blinked back sudden tears and tried to think of something that made her angry. She needed a crutch to get through the next few hours, and anger had never failed her before.

This damned, bloody planet. And the fools had named it Goodhope.

It was midafternoon of their fourth day in Perri's valley where the silvercups grew. They'd set up camp in the center of a clearing where there were no trees to overhang the strands of the stunfence, no easy avenues for the animals that prowled or slithered and watched them with hate-filled eyes.

Doro hadn't expected to live this long. There had been half a dozen alarms so far: diving kubirds and tomkins, weasels trying to slip under the fence; and once a huge black animal Doro had never seen before stood in the shadow of some trees, snorting and pawing at the ground, obviously trying to work up its courage to charge. Doro threw rocks at that one, and, surprisingly, that had been enough to send it on its way — for the moment.

The charges in the heat pistols were almost exhausted, and now the stunfence was sparking at one of the generator boxes. That wouldn't hold up much longer.

But she wondered if it would be the animals that brought an end to this — or something else. Perri had stopped speaking yesterday, not just to Doro but also to the ghost of her son, who she'd insisted was with them in their camp. For hours she sat staring at nothing, a darkly brooding expression on her face. She couldn't stand to be touched, and moved away whenever Doro came near.

Worst of all was what had happened this morning. The fence was repaired now, and Perri was back inside, sulking in their lean-to shelter, but Doro still felt the chill of fear as she made her daily call to Thib.

"You're still there," he said, his voice faint and tinny. He didn't ask the obvious question, but it was in his voice just the same.

She told him of waking this morning to find Perri gone, a section of the stunfence down. After a frantic search,

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she'd found her sister, leaning against a tree, out of sight of the clearing. "She had a weasel cub cuddled in her lap, Thib, and she was petting it." Doro shuddered again as she remembered it.

"Why didn't it tear her throat out? Those things are nasty."

"I don't know. I managed to kill it before it turned on her, but she started screaming at me. I thought she was going to attack me right then and there." Even more shocking than seeing her sister with the weasel cub had been the glare of madness in Perri's eyes. Doro hadn't really believed Thib when he'd told her what would happen to Perri, how she would change. She couldn't think of her sister without being reminded of soft and gentle things. The woman who had screamed at her, with weasel blood splashed over her pants and shirt, had not been her sister.

"Doro, please give this up while there's still time. We need you here. You can't do anything more for Perri."

She only waited for him to finish without listening to the words. Then she pressed the TRANSMIT button. "Did you find any of the old records about this disease, amoeba, whatever it is?"

"Just one report, not much to it. It mentions a period of weakness. But you say she's already been through that."

That had been their second day in camp, while Doro was trying to build some sort of shelter for them against the branchless trunk of a dead tree in the center of the clearing. Perri hadn't recovered her strength after their long journey to the valley, and by the second day, she'd been too weak even to sit up. After putting the lean-to together, Doro had had to feed her and care for her and listen as she chatted mindlessly to her ghost.

"She's stronger now, and the stronger she gets, the more strangely she acts."

"Those things have probably started destroying brain tissue. Damn! I wish I knew more about them."

"Well, I'll give you reports as long as I can. How are things in the settlement?"

"Not good," he said. "Not good at all. Last night Bartlet smothered his son, then cut his own throat. Left a note saying he thought he was going to die soon and he didn't want to leave the boy to suffer alone."

That must have been a blow to the rest of them. They'd had suicides before, a flurry of them right after the survivors had decided to retreat to the caves, where they would be less vulnerable to attack. Making that decision had been a kind of watershed: they'd had to accept not only the knowledge of their own defeat but also the realization that the situation on Earth was probably hopeless or the ships would have returned as planned. For the most part, those who had then given into despair were

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the older colonists, those who'd left families at home, promising to bring them out on a later ship. But Bartlet had been a young, healthy man with few remaining ties to Earth.

"Say hello to the ghosts for me," Doro said bitterly.

"Don't laugh," Thib replied. "I think we'll all be talking to them soon."

She signed off, feeling cold, feeling as if she never wanted to move again. But she recognized the signs, knew the only way to fight the depression that was creeping up on her was to force herself to do something even though there seemed to be no point in doing anything. She stood up and went over to their shelter to put the radio away.

Perri glared at her from a corner. The stench inside the lean-to was almost strong enough to cut and carry. Weasel, probably the worst-smelling animal on the planet — though none of them could be called fragrant. The cub Perri had been petting this morning must have pissed all over her.

"I'm putting some water on to boil," Doro said. "You get out of those clothes so I can wash them."

Her sister stalked outside, muttering. The only word Doro could make out was *stink*.

"Yes, you do stink!" Doro shouted after her, feeling childish. "Now do what I told you. Either you take off those clothes or I'll take them off you!"

Perri turned and snarled at her — there was no other word for it. She seemed more animal now than human. While she was waiting for the water to come to a boil, Doro watched her. Perri paced around their fenced-in camp as if it were a cage. She acted as if she wanted to be outside, but something was holding her back. What was it? Doro wondered. Not the stunfence. Perri knew as well as Doro how to disconnect the wire, had proved it when she went outside this morning. Could it be that she still felt some attachment to her sister, something that had endured in spite of what the Kish amoeba was doing to her?

Why am I here? Doro wondered. I wanted to give her an easy death, make her happy. But maybe that isn't possible. Maybe she'd be happier if I just let her go.

She shook her head impatiently. The thought was nonsense. Perri wouldn't last five minutes out there without the protection of heat pistol or stunfence. If she was going to give up so easily, why had she bothered to bring Perri here in the first place?

The water began to boil, the soft spitting sound seeming very loud in the quiet clearing.

"Perri, take your clothes off. I'm going to wash them now."

Perri ignored her.

When Perri's back was turned, Doro jumped her, feeling a sudden, blessed relief from the tension and

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frustration. Anger boiled through her as she fought to pin Perri down, tried to pull off her clothes. Perri was strong, stronger than Doro thought. They rolled together in the dust, panting, muscles straining. Doro sobbed and cursed, her face wet with tears, but Perri fought silently. Doro tried at first to use no more force than necessary, wanting not to cause her sister any more pain, but Perri's new strength was amazing, and at last there was nothing to do but club her on the side of the head with a fist. Perri sagged, dazed, and Doro was able to pull off the last of her clothes. She threw them next to the water bucket, then knelt there in the dust beside Perri, panting, hating himself.

The smell — that weasel smell — was still so sharp it stung her nose. But Perri was naked, her clothes several feet away. Doro thought it should not still be possible to smell them.

God, what was it? The dust? Did this whole planet have the same stink?

Doro reached her hand out to Perri's sweat-slicked body, raised the hand to her nose. It was Perri's sweat that smelled so bad, not a human smell at all — it was the smell of kubirds and whistlers, weasels and tomkins, the same smell/taste that was in all the meat they ate.

Perri shook her head, rolled over, and scrambled away from Doro.

Doro knelt in the dust, her mind working furiously. Was it their diet that made Perri smell that way? But they both ate the same things — all the colonists ate the meat of the native animals because the pigs, sheep, and cattle they had brought from Earth had all been killed. But if it was their diet, then Doro knew she would smell the same; she wouldn't be able to notice a difference between herself and Perri.

A sound made her look up. Perri was crouching close to the fence, and she was crying softly.

"Let me go," she pleaded when she saw Doro looking at her. "Please, I don't know what's happening to me, and I don't want to hurt you. Please let me go."

Doro hesitated only for a moment. Then she got to her feet, tossed Perri's clothes to her, and dragged herself over to take down a strand of the fence. It was the only comfort she could give her sister.

What's the word? *Pheromones*? Thib, you're the doctor. Tell me if I'm crazy." She pressed the RECEIVE button.

"They transmit information," he said thoughtfully. "They tell an animal when to fight, when to mate, they mark out territory — but a whole *planet*? You think the amoeba is responsible? What about predators? How do they distinguish their prey if every kind smells the same?"

"There's probably a whole range of scents. Maybe the amoeba is responsible for only one part of it. But

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maybe that's the part that concerns us — not having it might be what triggers the attacks. The animals seem to go crazy with fear when we're near them. Doesn't it make some kind of sense?"

"Yes, I guess it does. But what good does all this do us if the amoeba kills us instead of the animals? We're just as dead."

"Maybe not. Thib, you said there were a dozen cases after Kish. Were any of them ever allowed to run their course? You said you thought this thing damages the brain cells, like the kind of amoeba they had on Earth. But did anyone ever do an autopsy? Or were you just guessing from the way the victims acted?" Without waiting to receive his answer, she went on. "Perri has been outside the fence almost a full day now. The animals aren't bothering her and she looks well. Maybe it wasn't the amoeba that killed those others. Maybe it was the madness and the fear. Maybe this thing stabilizes somehow, and the victims come to their senses again. Maybe we can live with this thing, Thib." Maybe we can *live,* she thought.

"Too many maybes, too many guesses. But there's at least a chance that you're right," he said. "Look, I can set up a test with one of the goats. You keep an eye on Perri and keep sending me reports."

Doro didn't answer right away. She was watching her sister, who was sitting on the other side of the clearing, singing to herself and mending a rip in her shirt. What choice did they have? If this wasn't the answer, then maybe she'd better dig her own grave and hope that when the time came, there would still be someone alive to put her in it.

"You run your test," she said, "and I'll send reports for as long as I can. But don't let anyone come out here to check on us. I think it's going to be dangerous for the rest of you in this neighborhood."

"You mean because of Perri?"

"I mean because of both of us. It's a warm day. I think I'll go for a swim," she said and turned off the radio before she could hear his objections.

It was some days later. Doro had lost count. The world had turned very strange: lights were brighter, sounds more piercing. Hallucinogenic, a distant part of her mind reported. She wondered what that meant. Smells, which had always seemed stronger to her than to most people, became even stronger; they seemed to flow through the air in almost visible currents.

She was lying on her back on her blanket in the lean-to shelter, looking up through chinks in the roof at thick, golden sunlight. Something. Something was teasing at her, stabbing with sharp little jabs, wouldn't let her rest. What was it?

She turned over on the blanket, found herself sniffing like a dog. She

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discovered she could sort out the smells as if they were tangled threads. There was winegrass, and over there a drift of pollen from the silvercups, light and sharp. But over all of them, through and around, was this — this *other*-smell. It was dark and heavy, like death and fear and rot. It was *other*ness, the bad thing.

There was a growling noise. She was surprised/not-surprised to find it was coming from her own throat. The blanket, the frightening otherness. It had to be destroyed.

She began to tear the blanket, to rake at it with her teeth and nails, ripping, shredding, until it was nothing but a heap of fibers. But still the smell was not destroyed. It was there, reaching deep into her brain, like claws, tearing up things that had been buried, hurting.

Fire. There was a fire burning in the clearing. Fire was cleansing. Fire would destroy. She dragged the pile of fibers to the fire, nearly smothered it. Choking smoke rose in a cloud, stinging her eyes, but then flames followed, clean tongues, burning the otherness, destroying.

When the fire had nearly consumed the blanket, she turned, sniffing. The smell was not gone. It was in the shelter, smeared over everything like a layer of filth.

With a scream she launched herself at the wall of the lean-to, knocking down the lashed-together branches, throwing them aside, getting knocked down herself when the roof fell on her, bruised, and not caring, not feeling it. This place, so full of that ghastly smell, had to be destroyed. She was growling, sometimes screaming and sometimes sobbing.

What was happening to her? Like an echo of her own screaming, she could her mother's voice. This was not Doro. Control. This was not the way Doro was supposed to act.

Then there was something holding her, stopping the wildness, the thrashing. It was a gentle strength and softness.

"Stop it, Doro. I'll take care of you," Perri crooned. "It's all right. I'm here. I'll take care of you."

There was another sense of wrongness. Hurt Perri. What was *happening* to her?

"I'm sorry," she gasped, the words coming hard. "I shouldn't have brought you here. I hurt you — this place —" She felt her whole self being shredded as the blanket had been shredded, being lost, losing control, blowing away in a strange wind.

"It's all right," Perri said. "It's all right now. Hold on to me." There were more words, but the words didn't matter. The strength was there and Doro leaned on it.

"No more ghosts?" Thib asked.

Perri gave him a faraway smile. "Well, I haven't *seen* Jimmy again since shortly after Doro brought me out here. But his spirit is here. Can't

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you feel it? A kind of peace."

"I feel something," he agreed, looking out over the flowering valley where everyone from the settlement had gathered for a ceremony of thanksgiving. There were tables full of food and drink, there was music and the uncertain laughter of people who had been fearful too long. The experiment had been successful, and though it had been three months since the ending of the dark time, their hope was still a fragile thing.

Doro watched as her sister walked away, stopped to speak to a man whose face Doro couldn't see. She frowned as the man put his arm around Perri and pulled her close.

"You don't approve?" Thib asked.

"What?" she asked with a start. "Oh, of Perri and him? *Yes,* I approve. If she has the courage for it again after all she's lost, I think it's wonderful. I wasn't thinking of them, I was thinking of Earth. You know, someday they might put things back together and send ships out to visit us. I was wondering what they will find. Goodhope has changed us a lot already, and I don't think it's done with changing us yet."

He grinned and picked up a bottle of wine to refill her glass. "It's changed the rest of us, I know. But you? Doro, you're a rock. The only way we could change you would be if we slapped a coat of paint on you."

She thought about telling him he was wrong, telling him about the time she had been lost and alone in a frightening new world. But — no. Thib had been through his own dark time. He knew. She raised her glass.

"To ghosts," she said.

(from page 92)

and this time not look back. Or I can go home.

There were two paths before her now, just as there had been fourteen years ago, and they were almost the same two paths. One of them was the cracked white pavement that led to the front door.

She slipped the key into the lock, and the door opened to her with its familiar click and groan. She stepped into the darkened hall, eyes on the light that spilled from the living room. Her heart was beating hard and fast. She didn't ask herself what she was afraid of. She didn't know if she would be more frightened if the house were empty this time, or if it were not.

"Helen?" she called, and waited.

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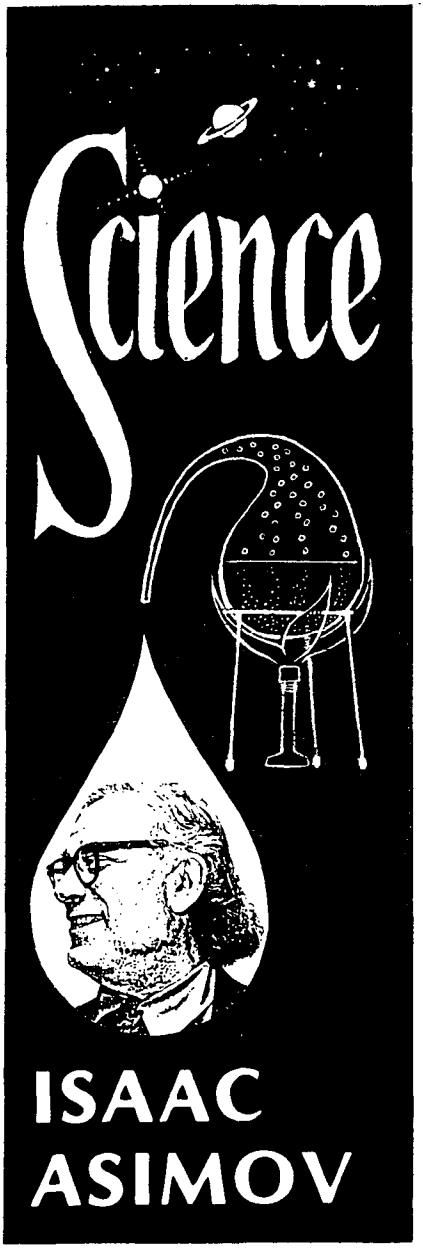

ARISE, FAIR SUN!

In recent years, there have been numerous books of lists of one kind or another. And if enough people make enough lists in enough categories, it becomes inevitable that any given object should eventually be on one list or another. Even me!

Naturally, I would not be surprised to be on the list of someone's ten favorite science fiction writers. I was not prepared, however, to be found on someone's list of the ten sexiest men in America. Naturally, I know that I'm one of those ten, but I didn't really think anyone other than myself had discovered that fact.

It was not an undiluted triumph for me, though. I was placed on the list on condition that I get rid of my "silly sideburns."

Fat chance!

In the first place, I like them, and, in the second, they have unparalleled importance as a recognition device, and that is important to anyone in the public eye. I was again made aware of this, a few days ago, while having lunch in one of New York's more highbrow eating establishments.

During the lunch, a very attractive young lady approached me diffidently and asked for my autograph. I obliged in my usual suave manner and said, as I signed, "How did you know I was me?"

And she replied, "Because you *look* like you."

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She meant my sideburns, of course, which are distinctive, since few people other than myself have the cast-iron self-assurance to be seen in public with quite so luxuriant a set.

Yet identifying someone or something by his or her or its looks can lead to mistakes, as many have found out. After three successive essays on different ways of producing electricity, I begin a fourth with two such misidentifications through appearance.

In the 1740's, gold mines were discovered in what was then eastern Hungary and is now northwestern Rumania. The usual avid search uncovered more veins of gold elsewhere in Hungary, but sometimes the quantity of gold obtained from such veins was disappointingly small. Hungarian mineralogists naturally got to work in order to find out what was wrong.

One of them, Anton von Rupprecht, analyzed ore from a gold mine in 1782 and found that a non-gold impurity accounted for the gold that was not obtained. Studying this impurity, Rupprecht found it had some properties that resembled those of antimony, an element well known to the chemists of the day. Judging from its appearances, therefore, he concluded that that antimony was what he had.

In 1784, another Hungarian mineralogist, Franz Joseph Müller (1740-1825), studied Rupprecht's ore and decided that the metal impurity was not antimony because it did not have some of that metal's properties. He began to wonder if he had a completely new element, but didn't dare commit himself to that. In 1796, he sent samples to the German chemist Martin Heinrich Klaproth (1743-1817), a leading authority, telling him of his suspicions that he had a new element and asking him to check the matter.

Klaproth gave it all the necessary tests and, by 1798, was able to report it as a new element. He carefully, as was proper, gave Müller (not himself or Rupprecht) credit for the discovery, and supplied it with a name. He called it "tellurium," from the Latin word for "Earth" (not a very imaginative name, in my opinion).

Tellurium is a very rare element, less than half as common in the Earth's crust as gold is. However, it is commonly associated with gold in ores, and since few things are as assiduously searched for as gold, tellurium is found more often than one would expect from its rareness.

Tellurium is (as was eventually understood) one of the sulfur family of elements, and the Swedish chemist Jöns Jakob Berzelius (1775-

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1848) was not surprised, therefore, when, in 1817, he found tellurium in the sulfuric acid being prepared in a certain factory. At least, he found an impurity that *looked* like tellurium so that he took it for granted that that was what it was.

Berzelius was not an easy man to fool for long in this way. Working with the supposed tellurium, he found that some of its properties were *not* like those of tellurium. By February, 1818, he realized that he had still another new element on his hands, one that strongly resembled tellurium. Since tellurium was named for the Earth, he named the new element for the Moon, and since Selene was the Greek goddess of the Moon, he called it "selenium."

In the periodic table, selenium falls between sulfur and tellurium. Selenium is not exactly a common element, but it is more common than either tellurium or gold. Selenium is, in fact, nearly as common as silver.

Selenium and tellurium were not particularly important elements for nearly a century after their discovery. Then, in 1873, there came a peculiar and completely unexpected finding. Willoughby Smith (I know nothing about him otherwise) found that selenium would conduct an electric current with much greater ease when it is exposed to light than when it is in the dark. This was the first discovery ever made of something that was eventually called "the photoelectric effect"; that is, the effect of light upon electrical phenomena.

This behavior of selenium made it possible to develop the so-called "electric eye." Imagine a small evacuated glass vessel containing a selenium-coated surface that is part of an electric circuit. A beam of light shines into the vessel so that the selenium is a conductor. An electric current passes through the selenium and acts, let us say, to keep a door closed, a door that would ordinarily be pulled open by some device.

The beam of light extends across a path along which people approach. As a person passes through the beam of light, the glass vessel is momentarily in darkness. The selenium no longer conducts a current and the door swings open. It's right out of the Arabian Nights! You don't even have to say, "Open, sesame."

But why should light affect electrical conductivity?

Well, why not? Light and electricity are both forms of energy, and, in theory, any form of energy can be transformed into any other (though not necessarily completely).

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Thus, electricity can produce light. The flash of lightning during a thunderstorm is the result of an electrical discharge, and when electricity is forced across an air gap, a bright spark results. In 1879, Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) in the United States and Joseph Wilson Swan (1828-1914) in Great Britain invented the incandescent electric light that is still used today and that produces light from electricity in enormous quantities.

It was, however, easy, even in Willoughby Smith's day, to see how an electric current could produce light. It was not so easy to see how light could produce an electric current.

The beginnings of an answer came in 1887, when the German physicist Heinrich Rudolf Hertz (1857-1894) was experimenting with oscillating electric currents that produced sparks across an airgap (and discovered radio waves in this fashion). Hertz found that sparks were produced more easily when light fell upon the metal points from which the sparks were being emitted. As in the case of selenium, the passage of electric current was being made easier by light, but now it seemed to be a general phenomenon and something that was not confined to a single element.

In 1888, another German physicist, Wilhelm L. F. Hallwachs (1859-1922), sharpened things a little. He showed that a metal plate that was negatively charged tended to lose that charge when it was exposed to ultraviolet light. A metal plate that was positively charged was not affected by ultraviolet light.

Why should the two types of electric charge behave differently in this respect? In 1888, physicists could not say.

At this time, however, physicists were studying the effect produced when electricity was forced not merely across an air gap, but through a vacuum. When this happened, there was accumulating evidence that something was radiated outward from the cathode (that is, from the negatively-charged portion of the circuit). This was referred to as "cathode rays," and there were arguments as to whether it consisted of light-like radiation, or of a stream of tiny particles.

The argument was not finally settled until 1897, when the English physicist Joseph John Thomson (1856-1940) produced observations that showed quite clearly that cathode rays were a stream of tiny particles, each carrying a negative electric charge. They were *really* tiny, too. Thomson showed that they were much smaller than atoms. One of

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these particles is only 1/1837 as massive as the most common form of hydrogen atom, which is the least massive atom that exists.

The cathode ray particles were named "electrons," a name suggested six years earlier by the Irish physicist George Johnstone Stoney (1826-1911) for the minimum electric charge that could exist, assuming there was such a minimum. As it turned out, the charge on an electron *is* such a minimum under ordinary laboratory conditions. (Quarks are thought to have even smaller charges, some 2/3 that of an electron and some 1/3, but quarks have never yet been detected in isolation.)

As long as physicists thought of electrons only in connection with cathode rays, the electron seemed to be only fundamental bits of the electric current, the "atoms of electricity," so to speak. Here, however, is where the photoelectric effect began to show its importance in the development of the great revolution in physics that took place at the turn of the century.

The German physicist Philipp E. A. Lenard (1862-1947) studied the photoelectric effect intensively beginning in 1902. He showed that ultraviolet light, falling on various metals, brought about the ejection of electrons from their surfaces. It was this loss of electrons that carried off negative charge. If the metals were uncharged to begin with, negatively-charged electrons were still ejected, leaving a positive charge behind.

The fact that electrons could be ejected from uncharged metals showed that they were not merely bits of electricity, but were components of atoms. At least, that was the simplest way of accounting for Lenard's discovery, and continuing experiments in later years confirmed the notion.

Since electrons were ejected by the photoelectric effect from a wide variety of elements, and since (as nearly as anyone could tell) all the electrons shared the same properties, whatever the element of origin might be, it seemed to follow that electrons were components of *all* atoms. The difference between atoms of different elements would have to depend, at least in part, upon the number of electrons each contained, or upon their arrangement, or both, but could not depend upon the nature of the electron itself.

This sort of thinking set physicists on the track of atomic structure, and, by 1930, the atom assumed the familiar picture it has had ever since. It consists of a tiny central nucleus built up of two relatively

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massive types of particles, protons and neutrons, the former carrying a positive electric charge equal in size to the negative charge on the electrons, and the latter uncharged. Surrounding the nucleus are a number of very light electrons.

Since the negatively-charged electrons are on the outskirts of the atom and are very light and therefore easy to force into motion, while the positively-charged protons are in the center of the atom and are, besides, relatively massive and, therefore, comparatively immobile; it is only the movement of the negative particles that produces the electric current. There is therefore radiation from the negative electrode, or cathode, and not from the positive electrode, or anode. And that is why ultraviolet light causes the ejection only of electrons, causing a loss of negative charge and, eventually, leaving behind a positive charge.

The picture most of us have is of the neutrons, protons, and electrons as little spheres. Actually, they must all be described in terms of quantum theory, which gives a good mathematical description but does nothing for us pictorially. There are no analogies drawn from common experience that would help us understand what these subatomic particles would "look like."

The development of the quantum theory is also bound up with the photoelectric effect.

Lenard noted that if light of a particular wavelength ejected electrons, all those electrons came off at the same speed. If the light were made more intense, more electrons were ejected, but at no greater speed. If light of shorter wavelength were used, however, electrons were ejected at greater speed, and the shorter the wavelength, the greater the speed. A dim light of short wavelength would eject few electrons, but would eject those few at high speed. An intense light of longer wavelength would eject many electrons, but at lower speed.

If the light were sufficiently long in wavelength (the "threshold wavelength"), the speed of ejection would fall to zero, and there would be no electrons ejected no matter how intense the light. The value of this threshold wavelength varied from element to element.

(For his work on the photoelectric effect, Lenard received the 1905 Nobel Prize in physics. The trauma of German defeat in World War I embittered Lenard, however, and he became notorious as one of the few notable scientists to become a convinced Nazi in the early days of that movement and to remain one throughout his life. Even in this way, he may have unwittingly served humanity, for he denounced modern

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theoretical physics as "Jewish" and, therefore, wrong. Since he had Hitler's ear, he may have helped persuade Hitler not to lend much support to nuclear research and thus prevented Nazi Germany from getting the nuclear bomb in time to allow it to win the war.)

Classical physics could not explain the connection between wavelength and the photoelectric effect. Something else had to be sought for, and something else existed.

In 1900, the German physicist Max K. E. L. Planck (1858-1947) had worked out the quantum theory to explain the manner in which wavelengths were distributed in the radiation from a hot body. No suitable equation based on the notion of energy as a continuous substance would work, so Planck supposed that energy came in discrete bundles he called "quanta" (Latin for "how much?"). Energy could not emerge from the hot body in amounts smaller than the quanta, but the size of the quanta varied with wavelength. As wavelength grew shorter, the size of the quanta grew correspondingly larger.

The equations based on quantum theory described the wavelength distribution in the radiation of hot bodies perfectly but, for some years, physicists (including Planck himself) considered it all merely a mathematical trick designed to solve this one problem, and didn't really think that quanta actually existed.

In 1905, however, Albert Einstein (1897-1955) showed that quantum theory explained all the puzzles involved in the photoelectric effect. One quantum of energy knocked out one electron. If the wavelength of light was too long, the quantum was too small to break that atom's grip on its electrons and there was no ejection. As the wavelength grew shorter, the quantum would get larger and eventually become just large enough to force an electron away from its atom so that it could be ejected. That would be the threshold wavelength. As the wavelength continued to grow shorter, the ejection would be brought about with greater energy and the electron would move off at greater speed. Since the atoms of different elements hold their electrons with different amounts of energy, the threshold wavelength naturally varies from one element to another.

This was the first time that quantum theory fully explained a phenomenon for which it had not been designed. It lent the theory an enormous credibility, so that Einstein deserves almost equal credit with Planck for establishing it. When, in 1921, Einstein received the Nobel Prize in physics, it was for his work on the photoelectric effect and not

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for his theory of relativity.

Once it is understood that light can knock electrons out of atoms, the behavior of selenium loses its mystery. Once the light knocks electrons loose, these can drift about easily and that makes a larger electric current possible.

In the 1940's, scientists at Bell Laboratories, notably the English-American physicist William Bradford Shockley (1910-) were working with substances that could conduct electricity, but only with difficulty. They did not conduct as well as the metals, but they were not as stubbornly non-conductive as, say, sulfur, rubber, or glass. They were therefore called "semiconductors."

Certain semiconductors could be made more conductive if the substance of which they were composed was treated with small quantities of elements whose atoms contained one atom too many to fit into the crystal lattice of the semiconductor or whose atoms contained one atom too few.

When a semiconductor contains an occasional extra electron that lacks a place in the lattice, it tends to drift, increasing the ease with which a current can flow through. Since the extra electrons add a negative charge to the semiconductor, the latter is an "n-type."

When a semiconductor is an occasional electron short, there is a hole in the lattice, and the hole tends to drift in the opposite direction that an electron would. It acts like a particle with a positive charge, and the semiconducting property is again enhanced. Such a semiconductor is a "p-type."

Shockley and the others found that by combining n-type and p-type semiconductors in various ways, devices could be built that served the function of various radio tubes. These new devices require no vacuum, as radio tubes do, so they are "solid-state devices." When vacuums exist, they must take up considerable room to work properly, but solid-state devices don't need the room and can be very small. The latter also require no glass so they are sturdy and leak-proof; and they work at low temperatures so that they require very little energy and need no warm-up period.

In 1948, the "transistor" was developed and a new era of electronic devices was initiated.

When an n-type and a p-type semiconductor are combined, there is an "n-p junction" between them. There is always a small negative

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charge on the electron rich n-side of the junction and a small positive charge on the electron poor p-side of the junction. If the n-side of such a device is connected to the p-side by a conducting wire, electrons flow from the n-side through the wire to the p-side. A very tiny current would flow for a while until the electrons from the n-side fill enough holes in the p-side to stop the current.

The current was too small and short lived to be of use, but in 1954, the scientists at Bell Telephone discovered, by accident, that a p-n silicon junction could produce a sustained current of respectable size once it was exposed to light. It was the selenium discovery of eighty years before all over again.

The reason this happens is that the light knocks an electron out of a silicon atom and leaves a hole behind. If the device is hooked up to an electric circuit, the electron moves in the direction of the drifting electrons and into the wire. Meanwhile the hole moves in the opposite direction until it meets an incoming electron and is filled.

This current never stops as long as the light shines, for countless new loose electrons and new holes are continually being formed by the light, so that there are always new electrons to leave the device at one end and always new holes to be filled at the other.

Because such a device produces electricity, it is an electric cell just as are the chemical devices I described in the February and March issues. Because the electricity is formed by the action of light, it is sometimes called a "photoelectric cell."

The light acts to keep one side of the cell continually rich in electrons and the other side continually poor in them. This difference in electron-density produces an "electromotive force" that tends to make the electrons move in such a way as to even out the disparity. Electromotive force is measured in "volts" so such a cell is sometimes called a "photovoltaic cell." When sunlight does the work of knocking electrons out of atoms, the device is called a "solar cell."

Solar cells convert the energy of sunlight directly into an electric current, and such currents are the most useful and versatile form of energy in today's world. The vision immediately arises of virtually free electricity supplied by a Sun that shines endlessly — or for several billion years anyway. There are, however, catches.

1) Sunlight is copious, but it is dilute. That is, the whole world gets far more energy from the Sun than it can use in the form of electricity, but one square meter of the Earth's surface doesn't get much. That

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means we would have to spread solar cells over a large area to get the sizable quantities of electricity we would need.

2) Solar cells are not very efficient. The first photoelectric cells, those involving selenium, converted less than 1 percent of the energy of light into electricity. Modern solar cells, made of silicon usually, can convert about 4 percent of light into electricity. Banks of cells would have to be spread out over 25 times the area they would need if they were a hundred percent efficient. That means many thousands of square miles of solar cells to supply the world with the electricity it needs.

3) Although sunlight is free, solar cells are not. Silicon is a very copious element, the second most common in the Earth's crust. It is not found as an element, however, but only in combinations with other elements. To separate elemental silicon from these combinations is difficult and, therefore, expensive. It must also be made very pure and then just the proper quantities of impurities of particular types must be added. The result is that solar cells are surprisingly expensive for their size. If you imagine thousands of square miles of them in bank upon bank, and consider the maintenance costs, the location and replacement of defective ones, the damage done by wildlife, by weather, by accident, by deliberate vandalism, it would all be the most expensive "free" energy you ever heard of.

4) Although sunlight is free, it isn't always available. There are clouds and mists and dust galore. In most of the world's most thickly inhabited areas the weather is sufficiently unsettled so that you can by no means depend upon the sunlight supply, especially in the winter when you need unusual amounts of energy for lighting and heating. Even if you switch to areas where sunlight is fairly constant and other uses for the land are largely non-existent — such as various desert areas — it is still night half the time. What's more, even the clearest desert air scatters some light and renders it ineffective for the purpose, and this effect grows greater the farther the Sun is from the zenith. Indeed, much of the Sun's energy outside the visible light region is absorbed by the atmosphere altogether.

It may, in the end, prove more effective if we simply continue to make our solar cells cheaper and more efficient and then lift the whole thing into space. Solar cells in space have, in fact, already proved useful. They have been used to power a number of satellites where the quantity of energy required is low and where other sources are difficult to arrange. I am talking now, however, of very large-scale production.

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We might put a solar-power generating station, with square miles of solar cell banks, into a geostationary orbit so that it would hover over a particular spot on Earth's equator more or less permanently. There would be no atmosphere around the station to interfere and scatter and absorb light, so that the entire range of radiation would be available. There would be no night to speak of, since the station would enter Earth's shadow for only brief periods about the time of the equinoxes. There would be no life forms to interfere and be interfered with, and casual vandalism would not be likely. (There is possible damage by meteoroids and micrometeoroids, of course.)

A bank of solar cells in space could produce up to sixty times as much electricity as the same area of solar cells could produce on Earth's surface.

Of course, electricity in space would do us no good if it stays there, but it can be turned into microwaves and beamed to Earth in a form more concentrated than sunlight. It could then be collected by relatively small banks of receiving cells that can turn it again into electricity.

There is no way of being very optimistic that the project of solar energy production in space can be easily set up. It will surely take a long time and a great deal of labor and money, to say nothing of involving enormous personal risks for those working on it.

Still, the expense would be only a small fraction of what the nations of the world now seem gladly to spend on weapons of war they dare not use; and the risk to human life is an even smaller fraction of what the nations of the world seem gladly to risk for the sake of their hatred and suspicions.

The possible benefits are incalculable, as the clean, cheap energy of the Sun replaces that derived from the slow and expensive chemical oxidation of metals, and the dirty burning of fossil fuels.

Arise, fair Sun —

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This compelling new story takes place against the same setting as Wayne Wightman's "Ganglion," (August 1984): a station deep in space and a team of psychonauts that is probing into alien minds with stunning and frightening results.

The Tensor of Desire

BY
WAYNE WIGHTMAN

When the woman looked at him that way, Lanyon's lips involuntarily parted, his thinking stopped, and he knew that he wanted her. He had watched her all evening as she moved from guest to guest, but at that moment, when she stopped in the middle of the crowded room, touched her lips with her fingers and looked at him, he gave up the struggle to string more than two rational thoughts together, and it became as obvious to him as a lagoon in the middle of a desert that his life was about to change.

He knew her name was Elle Kalii and that she was mated to Clin Dallen, Lanyon's section supervisor. Dallen himself stood not more than ten meters across the room, drinking and backslapping with friends. He was a tall, black-haired, bearded man with narrow eyes and a receding chin who had enjoyed putting Lanyon on enforced leave two weeks before — although Lanyon had deserved it, according to the rules of the corporation.

But now, oblivious to the man, Lanyon and the woman stared at each other, strangers, poised like animals tensed to spring.

Peripherally, Lanyon saw the tall, black-haired man turn and glance in their direction — and that was more than enough reason to have another drink and to tell the barman to put a little libido suppressant in it. But Lanyon didn't. He watched the woman. He wanted her. And she watched back.

She stood tall and square-shouldered in the middle of the chattering, milling crowd, and her dark hair flared around her face like a burst of surf against a stand of rocks. Her wide,

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pale eyes, a color between blue and green, stared into his, and her lips seemed about to part.

Lanyon let his elbow drop from the bar, and they moved a step nearer each other as the room began to fall silent — but neither of them noticed. A couple of glasses made final clinks, and everyone else turned to face the door: Director Stattor, guest of honor, had arrived. Applause began, and even Elle Kalii turned, but only after a hesitation of several seconds.

Knowing that he was expected to be impressed by the arrival of the director, Lanyon turned to the bartender and pointed to his glass for a refill.

"Another komodo," he said. In the mirror behind the rows of ornate bottles, Lanyon saw that his face was taking on a hollow look, and his eyes had a reptilian flatness about them.

The party was at the request of Director of Alien Research Errit Stattor, a man whose obesity was exceeded only by his appetite for wealth. As he grew fatter and softer, he sent wave after wave of psychonauts into the minds of aliens on their alien worlds. As a vice president at United Tarassis, Stattor ran the probe station and the seventeen hundred people who lived on it as his personal possessions. From the probe's position a dozen light-years over the hub of the galaxy, Stattor supplied his company with thousands of locations of easily accessible mineral deposits, technological innovations, and endless multitudes of lower animals that would work in unpleasant conditions while making few demands. United Tarassis called this "service supply."

Lanyon listened to the applause and watched Stattor humbly dip his slick head in acknowledgment. He flapped one short arm as if to quiet the applause, but his five security agents stood behind him and cued the guests to applaud more. What disgusted Lanyon most— He shook his head and let the thought pass. With the woman out of sight now, his thoughts had begun to arrange themselves in a sensible order, reminding him of his regrets and recent losses.

"One more," he said to the bartender, putting the empty glass on the counter.

"Whatever," the barman said, and filled the glass again with the sparkling green liquor.

What disgusted Lanyon most was not Stattor's sweating physical obscenity or the way he used highly trained psychonauts until they were ghosts of themselves; nor was he most disgusted by the number of alien hosts that were destroyed by human probes. Most people loathed Stattor because he brought in substandard replacement parts for the probe-senders, and the infirmaries were always filled with psychonauts who had come back to find large parts of their minds filled with alien memories — but even this was not what disgusted Lanyon most.

Lanyon watched the section di-

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rectors fawning over Stattor, making reverent chitchat, offering him drinks or food, shaking and holding his bloated hands . . . and what disgusted Lanyon most was that two weeks ago, he had been doing the same thing . . . shaking that clammy tight-skinned hand, its tiny polished fingernails sunken painfully into the fatted flesh. Lanyon had hung onto that piece of limp meat and had grinned till his face ached. He had snuffled and whined affectionately, just like the other psychonauts and section directors, just like low-grades. His glass was empty again.

He felt someone nudging his arm, and for an instant he hoped it would be the woman with the hair and the pale eyes, Elle Kalii — but it wasn't. It was Blisson, one of the other discharged psychonauts from Lanyon's section. Like Lanyon, Blisson had been involved in irregular behavior — but whereas Blisson had only got two other people flashed, Lanyon's offense had been more serious: he had reduced two probe-senders to heaps of crackling insulation and smoking plastic. Equipment was hard to replace.

The party had now returned to its former volume, and Blisson had to raise his voice for Lanyon to hear: "Any luck?"

"The fat man just got here," Lanyon said. "And the way they're swarming over him, don't expect me to be able to get over to him too soon." Lanyon turned to face Blisson squarely. Blisson's face was soft and furry-looking, like some nocturnal animal . . . or perhaps Lanyon's eyes weren't focusing as they should.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Blisson asked. Then he glanced at the glass of glittering green liquid that Lanyon held. "Oh," he said, almost grinning. "How many of those have you had?"

"Four," Lanyon said, draining it. "Exactly."

Blisson gazed across the room at Stattor and shook his head. "A third of the levels are quarantined now, and Stattor is here having a party."

Lanyon tilted the glass in his hand and watched the green rivulets of liquor run in a circle around the bottom. "What better reason to have a party than to celebrate how lucky we are not to be infected."

"Spap," Blisson said under his breath. "Stattor is here to soothe the troops while he arranges some way to dispose of the damaged personnel he's keeping in quarantine — he wants those sections back in operation, and something has to be done with the defective workers."

"So let's both apply for a transfer," Lanyon said. The hallucinogen in the drink was beginning to kick in with some seriousness. His hands looked more and more like animals that clung to the walls of underground caverns.

"Sure," Blisson said. "Transfer. Just say the word and get transferred from being an employee of United Tarassis

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to being fuel for the core. The rumors about the aliens are getting hard to overlook. Hey," Blisson said congenially, his face becoming more predatorlike by the moment, "just try to talk to him, all right? Tell him that this is no virus and it's not radiation and it's not a stress reaction those people are having." He leaned closer to Lanyon. "There are aliens doing to us what we've been doing to them. There are alien parasites living in those people's minds. Tell him that, and tell him that you know someone who can tell him where they're coming from."

Lanyon stared into the near edge of the partying mass of people. Elle Kalii was there again, nearer this time, a lone unmoving figure in the middle of a hundred talking, drinking guests who had forgotten, for the moment anyway, that they partied in the middle of a disaster. The woman stared at him, and he could see her breasts rising and falling beneath the cobalt-blue spider-mesh she wore. Again, a veil dropped over his rational mind — his senses flooded with desire.

Lanyon heard Blisson breathe in deeply. "Shiss," Blisson whispered. "Look at those eyes. Who is that?"

"Dallen's mate, Elle Kalii," Lanyon said vaguely. The woman's eyes never left his as people flowed around her.

"My God. You've got a lot of nerve, Lanyon. I was going to ask you why you were drinking so much of that stuff, but I see now. And I was wondering what you were going to do as a follow-up to gutting those probe-senders on your section and burning the clothes off the firm's representative with the cutting torch . . . I mean, I was wondering what you could do after something like that. But I know the answer to that now, too. You're going to do any goddamned thing you want, aren't you?"

"Why not?" Lanyon's voice sounded deeper in his own ears. "They put me on leave. I've got a lot of time to fill up." His hands took the edge of the bar and pushed him away, toward the woman. "I'll try to talk to Stattor," Lanyon said indistinctly, but he was thinking of Elle Kalii, he was consumed by Elle Kalii and how she would feel under his hands, his skin separated from hers by the spider-mesh that moved with her breathing.

"Tell him we're being *invaded*," Blisson said. "Tell him that."

Lanyon drifted into the partygoers. They closed around him, their faces all slightly distorted, rodentlike or insectile, hungry-looking and nervous. And just ahead of him, those pale eyes, a color somewhere between blue and green, drew him farther into the swarming mass. She waited for him, and finally he stood in front of her, so close that had she not stood very straight, the tips of her breasts would have touched his chest. And she was tall — nearly as tall as he.

Her eyes glittered. "I don't understand this," she whispered huskily. "I

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don't know you. I don't know why I . . . stare at you."

"I'm the one your mate fired two weeks ago for wrecking some equipment. My name's Lanyon." He tried to swallow and then to say something more, but nothing was working; He couldn't think. In the crowd no one could see his hand reach forward and take hers. He felt her sharp-edged nails against his palm.

"Why did you do that?" she said, the words sounding more like an audible thought than a question. "Why do you stare at me?" She tilted her head back minutely and inhaled deeply. Her dark hair quivered around her face. "What are you going to do now?"

Lanyon saw a trace of fear in her eyes. He imagined that he looked hollow-cheeked and near-psychotic.

"Why did it have to be you?" she asked.

Lanyon heard the partygoers applauding, and he looked over Elle's shoulder. Stattor had probably just made some complimentary remark about their work. Once Stattor had said with his sweating humility that mineral locating was up 0.02 percent, and Lanyon himself had led the applause. But now Lanyon ignored the clapping — the liquor he had drunk made the reality of the room vague and variable, and only the woman in front of him was real, real down to her bones, and her life swirled through her blood and pumped her so full of desire that he could feel it in her breath and in the hot nervous energy that radiated from her hand into his.

"Can we— " She stopped. She forced the words out again: "Can we go . . . somewhere?"

Lanyon's eyes moved to the door as he wondered if they could get out unnoticed — but he knew they couldn't. It was impossible: the security men would see, Dallen would see . . . but if they could just get out. Lanyon's rational mind told him it was impossible, but he kept trying to see how it could be done.

A commotion broke out without warning near the door. A tall man was having a seizure — he was becoming possessed. He hunched his shoulders up behind his neck and held his arms in front of his chest like little paws.

Several women shrieked and ran to the far corners with their men following close behind.

The possessed man took a dozen tight creepy steps one way and then spun and quickstepped the other direction. This had happened on some of the other levels to such an extent that they had been quarantined. First one person, then three or four, then several dozen, and then a hundred would be affected. Then the exits would be sealed and the level would become a huge infirmary. Now they were calling it a pseudopsychosis. Two weeks ago they called it a viral infection. Before that, a stress reaction.

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Once all eyes had turned to the three men subduing the tall man, Lanyon faced Elle Kalii,his arms encircled her, feeling those solid muscles under the flesh of her back, and against his lips, her mouth opened and he tasted her and felt her heat around his tongue. Neither of them closed their eyes — Lanyon wanted to brand her image into his memory, he wanted to remember the curve of her cheek and the dark chaos of her hair. He didn't care who saw or who knew. He didn't care. He was out of control.

A stranger bumped into them and whispered, "Stattor moving this way."

Elle and Lanyon pushed themselves apart. He felt an irrational burst of hostility that anyone should interrupt them, but in a few seconds, he had gathered up enough discretion to wipe his face of its tenseness and to appear to breathe normally.

Elle glanced once at Lanyon and faded into the crowd. He last saw her moving toward the bar, blue mesh switching her legs.

When he looked back at Stattor, he saw that it was not just the fat man coming his way, but hanging on his arm was the tall, black-haired, and bearded Dallen. Dallen waved his willowy hands and spoke confidentially in Stattor's ear. The fat man's sweating face showed the only emotion he ever showed in public: wonderful, humble happiness. One could tell him that three psychonauts had been flashed on the last shift, and he would express only wonderful, humble happiness. Tell him that Levels 53 through 71 had a 70 percent pseudopsychosis rate — wonderful, humble happiness. "We'll look into it," he might say.

For all Lanyon knew, Dallen might be telling Stattor that everyone on Level 37 was vomiting blood — Stattor exhibited wonderful, humble happiness. Or was Dallen giving him background information on Lanyon's torch attack on the firm's field rep? But as the two of them moved across the floor, guests skittering aside, Lanyon realized they had no awareness of him. Dallen explained something ferociously, and Stattor waddled liquidly beside him, his face clenched in a fat-tightened mask of wonderful, humble happiness.

" . . . control," Dallen was saying. "*That* is the essence of human destiny. We — " He looked up and saw Lanyon — it took a second for it to register that someone would stand in their way and that the someone would be the man Dallen had recently put on forced leave.

"Good evening," Lanyon said, and then introduced himself by name. Close up, he noted that Stattor's face showed traces of great discomfort.

"I've heard of you," Stattor said. His voice was small and constricted-sounding, as though the fat on his neck pressed heavily on his larynx. "You damaged some of our equipment." The sweat-beaded face became

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even more harshly joyful. He wagged a short finger under his chins. "You mustn't damage what belongs to United Tarassis," he chuckled. "You could lose more than your temper."

"Control," Dallen advised helpfully. "Control is what sets us aside from trashlife, Lanyon. When we direct ourselves, we direct our destiny."

Lanyon couldn't believe what he knew he was going to say. "And we direct the destiny of others when we use third-rate replacement parts. Three psychonauts in my section got flashed because three brand-new retrieval systems were defective, four if you count the one I was using. Somehow, I lived. It must've been an accident."

"Pity," Dallen said.

"You make those components yourself, Stattor?" Lanyon asked.

The fat man never changed expression; his shoulders heaved with silent mirth, and Dallen radiated slick executive disgust. Lanyon could see the hungry reptile living under Dallen's skin.

"Don't talk yourself into an unpleasantness," Dallen said, his tongue twitching inside his mouth.

"So you shoot me into the core," Lanyon said, horrified at the challenge he heard himself imply. "Maybe the lights will burn a little brighter at your dinner."

Stattor yukked audibly. Lanyon thought he smelled an acrid rotten-straw smell from the fat man. His puffy eyes were no more than hairline slits, and his small nostrils flared erratically.

"You're acting disturbed, Lanyon," Dallen said, flicking his hands. "You should be examined. You've lost control."

"I lost control the day I signed up with UT." He took half a step closer to Dallen and talked into his face. "and I *am* disturbed, Dallen. Very badly disturbed. And when we start getting defective replacement parts into the life-supports, Dallen, you're going to be very badly, terminally disturbed, too, along with everyone else left here." Lanyon smiled pleasantly.

"We wouldn't allow that to happen, no, no, no," Stattor said through his humble happiness. "Heavens, Mr. Lanyon. You don't seem to be enjoying the party," he said as he breathed heavily. "Such serious concerns."

"An invasion isn't serious?" Lanyon said casually. "Psychonauts getting flashed on a regular basis isn't serious? A third of the levels on quarantine isn't anything to lose sleep over? And to think, I was alarmed over nothing."

Stattor's wattles flapped from side to side. "Invasion?" he said to Dallen. "Who's being invaded?"

Lanyon wondered if this was some kind of false ignorance on Stattor's part. On the other hand, it wouldn't be the first time he had seen the person who was supposed to be the most in control be the one most in the dark.

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Dallen looked blankly at Stattor and then turned to Lanyon and looked blankly at him. "Parasitic invasion? I've heard that rumor. What've you been drinking? Komodos?"

Lanyon started feeling idiotic. He had tried to make a scene, tried to provoke the two of them into admitting that something was wrong here — and now they wanted to know what he was drinking.

"Komodos?" Stattor wheezed. "Is that a good drink?"

"It allows the unconscious to assign certain animalistic characteristics to other people," Dallen explained. "It also decreases fear." He turned from his waist and again faced Lanyon. "It's used primarily by insecure people who feel they've lost control of their lives and prefer hallucination. It also enhances any paranoid tendencies. Now, Lanyon, what have you heard about this . . . parasitic invasion?"

"You saw the man over by the door? The one who was possessed? That's what I mean. The explanation fits, and I know someone who can pinpoint the source of the invasion."

Stattor was mumbling through his fat. "Invasion?" he asked distractedly. His short arms, propped away from his body by pockets of fat, fluttered erratically. "Does he mean the pseudopsychosis?"

"I believe so, sir. Lanyon, that man simply had a minor seizure. With the stress of working on the station, those things do happen." Dallen's face took on a pleasant, satisfied look. He had black hair and eyebrows, but Lanyon had not noticed before that Dallen had no eyelashes. It made his eyes look curiously small, beady and reptilian.

"It's the price of the project," Stattor said. "Sometimes a few good people are lost." He cleared his throat and swallowed hugely, never breaking his wonderful, humble grin. "But we're all family, Mr. Lanyon. All one big family."

"Some families eat their young," Lanyon said.

Stattor's body shook at varying frequencies as he giggled.

Dallen smiled ironically. "Tell me, what animal do I look like to you? You must've had enough of that stuff for the illusion to be pretty strong. What animal do you see in me?"

"I wouldn't let you baby-sit anything you could get in your mouth."

Stattor sputtered a giggle, and sweat shook off his face and dotted the front of his suit. "Let me try one of those komodos," he said finally, pushing himself toward the bar.

Dallen put his hands behind his back and smiled pleasantly into the air. "Enjoy your evening," he said to Lanyon. "Make the most of it. I know Stattor pretty well, and now Stattor knows you. Too bad," he said smoothly, turning away.

Lanyon stood there, slowly enveloped again by the crowd, and his

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heart pounded in every part of his body — in his hands, in his scalp, in his legs, everywhere. Why did he have to say that some families ate their young? That was probably what Stattor would remember the next morning, and Lanyon's name would go on some list along with other auxiliary fuels for the core.

Just like when he went into a rage and destroyed the probe-senders, and just like when he laid eyes on Elle Kalii, his rational mind had emptied and he had been victimized by his own chemistry — some part of him did things that his other, more respectable parts recoiled at. He hadn't chosen to wreck the probes any more than he had chosen to desire Elle or to insult Stattor and Dallen. But he had done it.

He rubbed his forehead. What he needed most at the moment was to get out of the press of bodies and to hear some silence.

Out in the softly lit white corridor, his ears hummed in the absence of noise. He turned left and went to the nearest observation lounge. There might be one or two other people there, but he could at least sit for a few minutes and watch the stars and let the liquor start to wear off.

Lounges were situated on the outer edges of the station hubs, and as Lanyon approached, he could feel the artificial gravity grow a little stronger. The door irised open, and when he stepped through and looked above him, he could see the outer surface of the hub through the transparent bubble, and beyond the station spread the glowing frozen turbulence of the galactic core. Somewhere out there spun a planet of aliens who knew the station's position . . . and gradually they were coming aboard . . . and no one in charge seemed to care.

The furniture and fixtures in the lounge were all furred and rounded and soft, but through the transparent dome, the stars were as sharp as knife points.

As nearly as he could tell in the starlight, only one other person was in the lounge, sitting on a bench at the far wall. Lanyon took the nearest formchair and had just relaxed when the other person turned to look at him. Her hair flared around her face, and even in the dimness, he could tell that her eyes were pale, aquamarine, the color of frozen alien atmospheres.

They stood at the same time and moved silently across the soft floor till they stood face to face, not yet touching each other.

"Why are you here?" she asked in a whisper. Lanyon felt her hot, moist breath on his lips.

"I wanted to get away from the noise. I said some things to Stattor and your mate I'm probably going to have to pay for — I just didn't want to pay tonight."

"He says a lot of things he doesn't mean."

Lanyon's fingers touched her hand.

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She moved closer, and her eyes filled his sight. They stared into him, past surfaces, through to the part of him that wanted her as much as she wanted him. His arms wrapped her against him, and he felt the existence of her flesh under his hands, her muscles and blood and skin, and he played upon her nerves, wanting to feed himself into her and possess her, even if he lost himself, even if he became her.

"I don't understand," she suddenly whispered against his cheek. "I don't know you — "

Lanyon kissed her, his hands moving around her back to her sides. He understood her words, and in some nether part of his mind, he had thought them himself. His tongue moved across the edges of her teeth, and beneath his hands, he felt the bones in her hips and he pressed her against him. Nothing cautioned him to resist, to slow down, or even to think twice . . . he wanted this woman, he desired her, he wanted to be bathed in her smell, enclosed in her skin, and to live in her eyes.

She pulled herself closer to him and then for an instant started to push him away — and then stopped and held herself tight against him. "I'm afraid," she said. "this doesn't happen to me."

"Nor to me," Lanyon whispered. "It's — "

"Excuse me," said a deep voice from the door. "Mr. Dallen is looking for Ms. Kalii."

Lanyon felt her shudder. She inhaled sharply. "Tell Mr. Dallen she will be there in a few minutes," she said, her voice low and harsh.

The messenger had left the lounge before they could separate themselves. They breathed through parted lips, and Lanyon felt a twinge of embarrassment for having revealed such an unreasoning attraction for the woman.

"I want to see you again soon," he said.

"Tomorrow, 0800?"

"Where?"

She paused, thinking, and he saw her shoulders tremble. "Level 39, violet sector. In the bar." She stopped and looked into his eyes. "I don't understand this," she said.

"I'll be there."

Already she had pulled away and hurried toward the door. It irised open, and she stopped and turned, and once more he was looking into those pale eyes. "You *will* be there, won't you?" she asked — but she didn't wait for him to answer before she turned and rushed away, as though seized with fear. The door irised shut and left Lanyon alone, standing in the middle of the lounge.

He put his hands on the middle of his chest and felt the warmth still in the fabric of his clothes from the heat of her body.

When he stepped into his quarters, the first thing he saw was the

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red message light on the commcon. Lanyon unbuttoned his suit-front and then rubbed his face as he walked into the kitchen. His face felt hollow and old and thin. He punched in the code for a mild relaxant and then watched blearily as the cloudy liquid jetted into a glass. The evening had seemed like a bad dream with an erotic ending. When he had got up that morning, he had felt only vaguely depressed; he was, after all, on forced leave, and everyone on the station heard about something like that. Otherwise, however, he hadn't felt too bad. Now, on the other hand, he had about as much future as a lab rat.

The relaxant tasted minty and cool as it slid down his throat and pooled in his stomach. He pulled a formchair out of the wall and let it swell up in front of the commcon.

"Message, please," he said, sitting back and letting the chair enfold him like a flower.

"A live message from Evven Blisson," said the husky voice of the commcon.

Between Lanyon and the machine, a purple mist gathered, and within a dozen seconds, it had shifted through the spectrum from blue to red. Then it sputtered and swirled into the lifelike image of Blisson — he was also seated, but he leaned forward, eager-looking.

"You're back earlier than I thought," Blisson said. "How'd it go? Did you get to talk to Stattor?"

"Yeah, I talked to him." Lanyon rubbed his face again. His eyes burned. "I told him the replacement parts we were getting were no good."

"Yes?" Blisson said, obviously wanting more. "What did he have to say to that?"

"He was very pleasant. He assured me he'd never use third-rate parts in the life-supports." When Lanyon looked up at the other man's image, he saw that Blisson was not taking this well. "I told him there was evidence of an invasion."

"And?"

"He wanted to know what I was drinking. He and Dallen stuck to the pseudopsychosis story."

"Those skin-bags. I hope when I'm possessed, I have a welder in my hands and one of them is close enough for some body work." He sighed audibly. "I guess you did you best."

"No." Lanyon shook his head. "I didn't do my best." He felt like spap. He was tired, infatuated, confused, half-lobed from komodos, on forced leave, and sitting there admitting that the last thing he had done he had screwed up. "That woman you saw . . . Elle Kalii . . . she distracted me. I don't know why I did what I did."

"Well, you won't have to be bothered by it much longer," Blisson said. "I did some projections, and figuring the current rate of seizures and disappearances, the last normal human being should find himself sitting here in the station in about two weeks,

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surrounded by creeping, twittering freaks."

"Shouldn't be too big a change from what we've got now." Lanyon held up his hand to keep Blisson from speaking. In his own ears, his remark was nothing but whining in the disguise of wit. "O.K.," he said. "I know something has to be done — but I'm not quite myself at the moment. Tell me what you know about the disappearances. What have you heard?"

"I have a friend who pilfers data for pocket money, and Memory says a lot of psychonauts and first-line technicians have been transferred to other stations that UT runs — but when I checked this out with the transfer agents, I found out that they didn't know anything about it. Most of the workers in transfer were new and had been told to enter backlog data for people who had allegedly already left. Of course, everybody had good reasons for what they did — but a lot of good people have disappeared. They were possessed, no doubt, and either fed into the core or quarantined somewhere." Blisson laced his fingers in a tight knot on his lap. "Stattor is disposing of defective software."

"I'll probably get my transfer orders tomorrow. Look, be straight with me: How sure are you of this invasion thing — 90 percent? — 99 percent?"

"I was there," Blisson said, "on the planet they're coming from. I saw them, and they told me *they* were doing what *we* do — they send psychic probes into alien minds, which in this case is us. Their operators are probably as skilled as ours, but the fine-tuning of the equipment gives them more trouble than it gives us, and the result when they miscalculate a penetration is that the subject becomes a jerky, twitching zerk-out. Whether that's a permanent condition, I don't know."

"What happens when they get it right? If their tuning is right, can we look at a human being and tell if there is a parasite in there?"

Blisson didn't answer right away. His face looked soft and tired. "I don't know," he said finally. "Nobody knows that. How could anyone know when Stattor refuses to consider that there's a possibility of an alien invasion?"

"So we have Stattor making us disappear on the one hand, and aliens coming at us on the other."

"Right."

"And it's a problem someone has to deal with."

"Right. Someone has to listen to us, and someone has to convince Stattor to pull us out of here. The station has to be moved." Blisson looked at his hands and then unlocked his fingers and placed them on his chair arms. "You could talk to Dallen."

"I could talk, but he isn't going to listen. He wants to see me in the core."

"Use the woman," Blisson said

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quietly. His eyes were heavy-lidded and cold. "Get her to talk to him. You could do that."

Lanyon leaned back in his chair. He really wished he hadn't heard what Blisson had just said. "Well," Lanyon mumbled. "what's a little more corruption in the scheme of things."

"I knew you'd see it my way." Blisson looked very grim. "Our position isn't good, here on the station. When this thing, this whatever-it-is, sweeps through here, it'll take her, too. No one will be left to do anything."

Lanyon closed his eyes and said. "I'll do it."

"Fine," Blisson said. "get some rest. You look like hell.". Blisson's image faded, and Lanyon stretched out in the chair. It followed his moves and formed itself against his body like a cupped hand.

An instant before unconsciousness blacked everything out, an image of her pale blue-green eyes swelled out of his memory and enclosed him like the leaves of a folding flower.

The bar in the violet sector of Level 39 was a replica of an old Earth bar: fishnets and imitation dried starfish hung from the walls. In the enclosed booths, a dense gloom hovered around the flickering candles that sat lumplike in the middle of the small tables. Across one wall, several alien fish nibbled at the gravel in the bottom of an aquarium.

Lanyon thought he would sit at the bar until his eyes adjusted, but a hand extended from one of the booths and touched his arm.

"Sit here," the voice said. It wasn't Elle . . . it took Lanyon a second, but then the connection was made. "No doubt you're surprised," Dallen said.

Lanyon slid in opposite him. The anticipation of a moment before turned into a leaden dread. He thought he should get the conversation to the point — he wasn't ready for verbal sparring. "What do you want?"

"First, I want to apologize for implying any kind of threat at the party last night. It wasn't generous of me."

"You wouldn't want to ruin your reputation for generosity," Lanyon said. "So what do you want?"

"I wanted to tell you that I understand that since I'm your supervisor, you might feel better about this situation if you could seduce my mate."

"I hadn't planned it as a trade-off, Dallen. I'm not like you."

"Of course not. Certainly you aren't. It just happens to be turning out that way. I take you off your job, and you try to get back at me. The best way to a man's heart is through his woman's belly. I understand that." He smiled.

"I'm starting to think an alien invasion may not be such a bad idea, if you're any kind of representative of our species."

"It's perfectly understandable that you'd want to hurt me, and I'm not

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going to let you do that." Dallen looked very pleased with himself. "So I won't stand in your way. Take her." In the flickering light, Dallen's bearded face was nearly without shape. His narrow eyes resided in a rectangle of pale skin. "I'm not jealous," he said. "I have my feelings under control. I am my own master."

"You're an amazing person, all right," Lanyon said without expression.

"Your sarcasm doesn't affect me. I know who I am and I know what I'm doing. You don't. You're operating on revenge, though you'd never admit it to anyone. When this is all over, you'll have nothing: not your job, not Elle, and you'll be wondering just what happened." Dallen smiled and looked down at his crossed hands.

Lanyon was thinking of slugging him backward and then hitting him with the table — but he remembered what he had promised Blisson, and cleared his throat and said, "You're right. In fact, I'm wondering what's happening here right now. You seem to think everything is fine." He looked directly into Dallen's eyes; in their shadowed sockets, they blinked once, like insects moving their wings. "A third of the levels are quarantined — doesn't that tell you there's a problem? This pseudopsychosis thing is bullshit, just like the viral explanation was bullshit — you know this and I know this, so why are you pretending with Stattor that there's no serious threat?"

Dallen's insect eyes moved again, and he opened his hands, palms up. "You don't have to make a public issue of this," he said conciliatorily. "If you want Elle, take her. Do whatever you want with her. Forward, backward, she likes it all." He gazed steadily into Lanyon's eyes, and weirdly, though his words were supposed to sound casual, his voice had a gritty edge to it and his mouth twisted in an uncomfortable grin. "Take what you want, Lanyon. It means nothing to me. My feelings are under my control, and *you* are the one who'll get to see the core, close up and personal."

"Elle isn't the issue here. The invasion is the problem." Lanyon tried to steady his voice, and he kept an eye on Dallen's hands. "There are informed people who are convinced that this station is on the verge of being overwhelmed by alien parasites."

"Elle will be shy about telling you, but she likes for you to use your hands a lot," Dallen said. Nothing in his face moved but his thin lips. "She likes variety."

Lanyon took a slow, steady breath deep into his lungs; still he didn't get enough air. "You're a real specimen, Dallen. Listen to what I'm telling you. Don't interpret, don't look for the message behind the message." He shook his head involuntarily several times. "Look, we're all in danger. There are aliens on this station, projected into human minds, living in

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human bodies, and the station needs to be moved — it needs to be got out of here."

"She likes for the lights to be out, too," Dallen said. "She likes to be surprised about what happens next."

Lanyon looked down at his hands folded on the edge of the table. It felt like the top of his head were about to blow off. He wasn't thinking anymore — just like the other times, and he couldn't help himself. He stood up, started to turn to leave, and changed his mind. He faced Dallen, and as smooth as air, just like he had been born for it, Lanyon's arm took up the rotational velocity of his turning body, and with his first two knuckles, he snapped Dallen just above his left eye. It felt like he had hit cement, but it felt good. It was rewarding to see Dallen flail over backward, pulling the table over on top of him. In the darkness of the booth, there were clunking noises as Dallen climbed back to his feet.

"You're out of control," he said to Lanyon. "Elle likes that. But I don't and Stattor doesn't." He cupped his eye-ridge in a pale, willowy hand. "One of these days soon, Lanyon, you're going to give the station a few extra hours of power. Normally, defectives are sedated beforehand. But you, Lanyon, you're man enough to be shot into the core raw, right?" His one visible eye was slitted down to the thinnest crack. "You're meat, Lanyon."

If so many people hadn't been watching, Lanyon would have dropped him a second time. Instead, he turned and headed for the door.

"You can't hurt me with this," Dallen called at him from behind the table. "I have control of my feelings." Dallen laughed aloud. "Be sure you pay attention to her ears and neck — she likes that. And use your hands a lot."

Lanyon paused in the doorway, paused and could feel only rage, a kind of thrilling wildness that wanted to plug his thumbs into Dallen's eyes and pull his head apart like ripe melon, a wildness that would have grinned at the sight of Dallen's liver squirting between his tightening fingers. Lanyon turned — and everything felt like it was on automatic. But Dallen must have seen or known, because Lanyon saw him rushing through the back door, glancing once, finally, over his shoulder to see if he was pursued.

A dozen pairs of eyes stared at Lanyon. He left the bar and stood in the corridor, leaning against the wall feeling damp inside his clothes and about to vomit. He wanted a sedative.

On his way back to his quarters, he thought over how Dallen had ignored the whole issue of their collective safety. Was it Lanyon's attraction to Elle that made the man crazy enough to ignore the security of seventeen hundred workers? Was that how human beings worked? And be-

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cause Dallen had publicly discussed Lanyon's private feelings, Lanyon had wanted to murder him — was this human? Was this the design they were a part of?

He needed a sedative badly.

Lanyon punched in the code for two milligrams of aggress-arrest and leaned on his counter as the glass filled with the characteristic brown liquid. The commcon chirped, and he took the drink over to it and said, "Message, please."

Colors flickered in midair, and Elle appeared. She was calling from a public booth. "Hi," she said. "I'm sorry about what happened. I'm not far from you and can be there in five minutes."

Lanyon had wondered what he would feel when he next saw her, knowing of those privacies that had passed between her and Dallen. He was relieved to find that he wanted to see her as badly as before.

"Hurry," he said.

She smiled briefly, sadly, and her image dissipated.

Lanyon dumped the aggress-arrest into the recycler and started picking up the clutter in his two rooms.

She stood in the doorway, nearly as tall as he, her pale eyes fixing him at once. "I'm sorry," she said, stepping inside and putting her arms around his shoulders. "Just as I was leaving to see you, a call came in wanting me to clarify some data I had processed last week. It was a fake call, something Dallen had arranged beforehand, but it took me twenty minutes to figure that out — and by then . . ."

"Doesn't matter." His face brushed against her cheek as he held her. "We're here now." His heart began to pump harder — and again, the feel of this woman, the smell of her hair, the sound of her skin sliding across the fabric of his clothes, the hot taste of her mouth, the softness behind her lips, and the firmness beneath his hands of her muscles wrapped around her bones; all consumed him, and in her he lost any idea of himself and all possibility of thought.

In the bedroom, in the dimmest light, her eyes glittered as she let her clothes fall to the floor.

"I don't understand this," she said. I've never wanted . . . or been so . . ." Lanyon stepped near her, and she clung to him.

"I want you," he said, his voice not sounding like himself.

They lay on the sheet-covered bed, arms around each other, their legs linked, and as they kissed fiercely, Lanyon was only dimly aware of his breathing, of the air hissing in and out of his nose, and with the last glimmer of rational thought, he wondered where his chemistry was driving him.

He moved over her and then under her, touching her dry, silky skin with

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his lips and tongue, tasting her from one nipple, up to her neck, under her chin to her mouth, where they kissed hard and she sucked his tongue into her mouth. She was strong, and easily rolled him over on his back and kissed him with her teeth against his lips, her wild hair enclosing their faces like a black nimbus. She leaned her weight against his chest, one wrist and hand draped across his forehead, holding him tightly.

She slid her other hand down between them, and suddenly Lanyon felt her warmth enclose him. As she flattened herself against him, he seized her and rolled her beneath him. She struggled under him, making small, high-pitched noises in her throat, twisting her body to one side and then the other, but he would not let her go. He pinned her wrists beside her head and then put his opened mouth against her neck, resting his teeth against her flesh. He bit her gently, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

He rolled against her from side to side, and when her breath began coming in short, rasping gasps, Lanyon felt himself at the beginning of a long, irresistible slide into an inevitable orgasm.

When it happened, she had slipped her wrists from his hands and held him to her. It seemed to Lanyon that he was only blood and bone and nerves and skin, that he could only feel and erupt — that he couldn't think or understand — he could only be. And following, a moment later, his mind filled with thoughts, doubts, questions, and a rabble of voices, all his own, all wanting to think.

He wrapped one arm under her shoulders, and with the other hand, he held her face next to his.

"What have you done to me?" he whispered.

"It never happened so fast to me before," she said. "I wanted to give myself to you, and I wouldn't have cared if you had picked me up and thrown me on the floor." He could tell by the feel of her cheek against his own that she was smiling.

"You would've cared when you hit the floor."

"Maybe." She shrugged beneath him. "I never wanted anyone to hold me that way before. I think I liked it."

He snuggled his face into her hair. It was damp and must-smelling, and he liked it. "I'm embarrassed . . . I think . . . that I could do that."

"It's a strange business," she said. "I liked it then, but I'm not sure how much I like the idea of it."

"Maybe we're possessed." He put his hands on the sides of her face and kissed her cheek, moving the tip of his tongue across her skin. "Are you thirsty? I have a beer attachment on the dispenser."

"Really? It must be an antique. I haven't had beer in three or four years." But she didn't loosen her hands on his back. "You know, it almost

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seemed like I were dreaming — like the top parts of my brain shut down, the rational parts, and I was seven-eighths an animal with no choices, no chance to resist, no control, and in a weird sense, I felt . . . free. There was nothing to decide — and that was nice."

The pressure of her hands lessened, and he pulled himself up enough to look into her eyes. He rummaged in his head for words, because he had felt it, too. "Like you were free of being human for a few minutes."

She nodded, her face serious. "I think we should have a beer now. I may have to attack you in a few minutes." Now she smiled.

Lanyon got out of bed and combed his hands through his hair. Elle stretched, arching her back and reaching her arms over her head. Muscles rippled in her thighs. Lanyon felt something sweeping over him again. Seeing her lying there, stretched across his sheets. . . . Slowly she twisted her shoulders, and her breasts flattened on her chest. Lanyon's heart began to pound, and an ache rose in his throat.

"Beer," Elle said, noticing the look on his face. "And then we'll make each other forget we were ever human beings."

He stepped backward, away from her — it was almost painful to let her leave his sight.

The first thing he noticed when he went back into the living room was that the message light on the commcon was lighted again. He ignored it and punched the code for beer into the dispenser. It poured black and frothy into two glasses. Halfway back to the bedroom, he heard the commcon chirp sharply — that was the signal that the message was urgent and needed his immediate reply. It also meant that he was being paged in the public areas of the level. He glanced once more at the gleaming red light on the panel, paused, and then went on into the bedroom.

Elle sat up and pulled the sheet across her legs.

"Emergency message," Lanyon said. "Probably your friend wanting to tell me that he doesn't mind if I make love to you."

She looked puzzled.

"That's what he told me this morning at the bar," he said, handing her the glass.

"He told you that?"

"Don't worry, he didn't mean it."

"I don't worry about his meaning it, but it's just a little out of character for him to say something like that." She took a slow drink and licked her lips. "This is good. Nice and bitter. Dallen's possessive — almost pathologically possessive."

"It fits."

The commcon chirped shrilly.

"He thought I was using you to get back at him for putting me on forced leave." Lanyon took several long swallows. "I don't know why I

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want you. But Dallen wants my bones. Real bad."

Elle's lips pressed tight together.

"Hold this a minute," he said, handing her the beer. "It's probably nothing too important."

Lanyon returned to the living room and said to the commcon: "No return reception. Message, please."

A blob of light ran through the spectrum and then formed into the person of Dallen. It was a taped message this time.

Dallen was casual and offhanded, his face unmarked by any stress, although his left eye-ridge was slightly swollen. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything important," the figure said, his nostrils flaring slightly, "but as of this moment, you're back on alternative duty. You're to go over to Level 14 and bring back an alien that was found there. Since there are quarantined levels between here and there, and since the drop shaft is temporarily inoperative, you'll have a shuttle waiting for you at Air Lock 37C." Within his beard a faint smile crossed his lips. "It's time for you to start being useful again. And Director Stattor agrees." The smile grew several degrees wider. "do this *now*, Lanyon. Have a nice day." The image evaporated.

"I heard," Elle said from behind him. She stood in the doorway, square-shouldered, leaning against the sill. She touched her lips with her fingers. "so what are you going to do?"

Lanyon put one arm around her, and with his other hand, he took the glass of beer and drank it to the bottom. "I'm going to watch my bones."

He looked into her face, into her blue-green eyes. Across her forehead a curl of dark hair was stuck to her damp skin. He kissed her cheek near her ear, her hair brushing across his nose, and he drank in her smell. Again, that amazing thing began to happen: a turbulence rolled across his brain, an electrical storm that blacked out thought, and he took her, not hearing the glass drop to the floor, and he swept her across the room toward the bed. Her fingers dug into his shoulders like talons.

As Lanyon hurried down the corridor toward Air Lock 37C, it seemed to him that everyone could probably tell at first glance that he had just got out of bed with someone. He had been too late to take a quick shower, and his clothes stuck to his skin. His hair was still damp, and he felt generally wrinkled.

"Mr. Lanyon," one of the technicians said as he rushed into the loading area, "we were just about to send out an alert for you." His eyes lingered on Lanyon a moment too long. "This shouldn't take more than forty-five minutes," he said pleasantly, "and then you can get back to whatever you were doing." The technician was a short man, dark-haired, and he

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looked to Lanyon to be heavier than regulations permitted. One of his eyes was wider than the other, giving his face a congenital leer. The technician led him to the shuttle, a white, angular, spiderlike carrier that normally carried two workers. "It's set for Level 14. They'll load the cargo as soon as you get there, so you won't even have to get out."

"Cargo? I was told that an alien was found on 14."

"An alien?" the technician said, his narrow eye narrowing more. "And you're bringing it back here?"

"You don't know anything about it?"

The man glanced at the time light high on the wall. "If we get you loaded right away and everything goes smoothly, you should be back just about the time I go on break. Right this way, Mr. Lanyon." He popped open the hatch on the shuttle.

"Wait a minute," Lanyon said, putting a hand on the man's shoulder. "What did the orders say about what I was bringing back?"

"Nothing, sir, just a foolish assumption on my part. Step right inside, sir, and we'll get you on your way." He glanced again at the time light and held out his arm in the direction of the shuttle's hatch.

Lanyon climbed in and hooked himself into the formchair. The hatch made a wet sucking noise as it sealed. Then the safety bolts snapped out around the edge of the hatch, locking it to the inside of the cabin.

Lanyon scanned the console to see that everything was green. The program was preset, and everything looked normal. The shuttle jerked once as it began to move across the deck to the decompression area, the pneumatics moving him smoothly. A hatch closed and shut the vehicle off from the work area. Lanyon checked the panel again, still feeling uneasy about the assignment. But if there was an alien over on 14, it's true, he thought, that they would probably send a person after it who had experience with alien consciousness.

The station's exterior hatch opened silently, and the shuttle drifted out, into space. He was already thinking of Elle again — if it took him forty-five minutes, he could be back with her in an hour. An image of her hair and eyes filled his mind.

Off to one side of him, the galactic hub spread across a third of the sky, a frozen vortex of stars and gas and alien life. In front of him were the thick hubs of the station, each of them housing two Levels. The hubs were stacked like saucers along an axis that extended several hundred meters past the living areas, and there, in a coiled lump, was the fusion core where Dallen had promised that Lanyon would end up.

When Lanyon passed over the lounge areas of the quarantined levels, he decided he wanted a better view, to see if anyone was visible there.

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"Tilt right," he said to the shuttle guidance. Official reports said that over 90 percent of the workers there had been afflicted with various forms of pseudopsychosis that left them incapable of normal activities — and that these areas were now functioning as infirmaries.

"Tilt right," Lanyon said again, trying to see down the steep angle through his view panel. Guidance didn't respond.

Lanyon tapped the program override and repeated, "Tilt right."

The shuttle moved levelly ahead.

Lanyon hit the emergency stop half a dozen times. The console remained pleasantly green. He slapped the communication stud, expecting to see the screen light up with the face of one of the central operators. Nothing. His mouth went dry as ashes. Beneath him, the disks of the station moved slowly by as his blood pressure rose, and still the panel showed nothing but green, signaling that all was well.

He pressed the red emergency ALL STOP with his thumb.

No response.

Several seconds later, sweat gathering around his scalpline, there was a signal buzz at the left of the panel's readouts, and the program screen read:

DOCKING APPROACH

But there was no change in the shuttle's attitude — and Lanyon was less than halfway to Level 14. He hit the ALL STOP with one hand and the communication stud with the other.

"Malfunction," he announced, his voice thundering in the silence of the cockpit. "Emergency on Shuttle 37C. I'm over Level —"

DOCKING COMPLETED

"Holy sh — "

As Lanyon had feared and had known it would be, the next reading was

BEGINNING DECOMPRESSION PROCEDURE

In less than a minute, after several other mechanisms had set themselves, safety bolts on the inside of the hatch would retract and the interior air pressure would blow it out — along with Lanyon's eyeballs and eardrums; and, ten seconds or so later, still conscious, his organs would rupture and his brains would squirt through the holes in his skull.

Lanyon leaped out of the formchair, turned, and yanked open the storage cabinets — there was a pressure suit, but that would take at least two minutes to get into. Below, on the deck, was a tool chest, an extinguisher, and a telescoping pry bar. He heard a click followed by a snap in the hatch — he knew from experience that he had about forty seconds left.

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The pry bar . . . he grabbed it and pressed it into the central recessed area of the hatch, wedging the ends against opposing safety bolts — maybe that would jam the mechanism and keep the bolts from retracting all the way.

His sweaty hands slid along the bar as he extended it.

Twenty seconds. A servo whined inside the bulkhead.

Fifteen seconds.

The pry bar looked as flimsy as a dry twig next to the square heaviness of the hatch bolts — and the pry bar wasn't meant to take any force that pressed from one end to the other . . . it was meant for jamming in between surfaces and for prying.

Ten seconds.

Lanyon thought of Elle, her hair and eyes, the way she looked at him, the way he wanted her, and he prepared to die. "Good-bye," he said to her. "Good-bye."

He fastened his grip on the pry bar, knowing that now it wasn't a matter of surviving — it was a question of dying in seconds or dying in minutes.

He clenched his eyes, hoping to keep his eyeballs from exploding, and wondered for an instant how much it would hurt when his eardrums ruptured . . . and how long he could hold his stomach muscles tight before he would have to breathe . . . and his intestines would burst out of his abdomen into his pants.

And there were so many things he wished he had done . . . to Elle, to Dallen, to Stattor . . .

He concentrated his power in his hands and counted . . . five . . . four . . . . His strength, his power. . . . And it dawned on him faster than words: the shuttle needed power, too.

He dropped the pry bar, not hearing it clatter to the floor, spun to the console, something in his head counting like a clock —

— three —

He flipped up the panel and saw a lacework of wire and circuit breakers.

— two —

Lanyon slammed down the one labeled MAIN.

The console winked out, the air circulation hushed, and nothing happened. He was left alone, in silence and darkness, with the sound of his blood still pumping through his body. He stood there, his muscles beginning to jitter with the passing overload of panic, and a minute later he took his first deep breath, stood up, and forced his shoulders back, a hundred muscles thanking him for the relief.

"All right," he said, thinking of all the things he wished he had done. "Now is the time."

He pulled the pressure suit out of the cabinet and sluggishly climbed into it. He felt like he had gone days without sleep. Everything began to hurt. When the helmet sealed and he pressed the checkout stud on his

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chest with a gloved hand, a tiny go-light winked on the indicator bar on the top of his forearm.

Lanyon stood at the breaker panel, reset the circuit breaker, and the hatch instantly blew open, making a hollow *bom!* followed by the dying sigh of escaping air.

Below him the numbers stenciled on the disks of the station told him that he was passing over Level 20 — still within the quarantined area . . . and in the lounge area of 20, he saw three curious faces turned toward him, their eyes and mouths looking like dark rips in pale paper.

He pushed off from the shuttle, and with several measured bursts of gas from the jets positioned around the perimeter of his back, he stopped his motion in relation to Level 20 and then nudged himself slowly toward it. He watched the faces in the lounge — and they stared back at him, their expressions slowly changing from curiosity to fear. They all turned and disappeared when it was clear that he was coming to their level.

He decided to try to enter the quarantined level first, since they, at least, had probably not received orders to kill him — and who knew what the technicians at the other decompression locks had been told . . . arrest him if he returns? . . . that he had become pseudopsychotic? In terms of what his society considered normal, Lanyon no longer fit. He had plans for Dallen that certainly would pass no committee's agreement. But first of all, he wanted to see Elle again and embrace her, draw strength from her, and then he would vent himself upon her mate.

Lanyon drifted past the now empty observation lounge and moved closer to the decompression hatch, thirty or so meters farther along the rim of the level. Once there, he banged with the toe of his boot on the curved sheathing. He could hear no noise, but he knew that from inside, he would not easily be ignored. They might not let him in, but they would know he was there.

Half a minute after he first struck the hatch, it slid open, and with the help of his gas jets, he pulled himself inside. The hatch closed behind him, and Lanyon backed up to the suit hanger, fixed himself onto it, and waited for the signal light to tell him that the pressure was normalized. Then he unfastened his helmet, unlatched the front closures of his suit, and stepped free of it.

The first thing he noticed was the air — it was heavy and thick with a smell like mildew and rotting meat, the smell of old breath and skin that had sweated and dried and sweated again until it supported vast populations of ammonia-loving bacteria.

When the inner hatch opened, a tall, pale man stood there, utterly immobile, staring at him. He was probably middle-aged, and his blond hair, wet with oil, lay flat across his head

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like a fibrous cap. When Lanyon took a step forward, the man recoiled, his eyes suddenly lighting up with fear and darting in their sockets as though they had been seized with spasms. He cringed behind the crossed arms he held in front of his face.

"I don't mean any harm!" he gibbered, still moving away.

"Neither do I," Lanyon said. He identified himself and said, "My shuttle malfunctioned while I —"

"You're dead!" the skinny man cried, hunching himself behind his arms. "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

"Obviously I'm not dead," Lanyon said. "I don't feel dead, and you can hear me talking."

"They said— But you—" The man slumped into a dead formchair and bowed his face to his knees and made several hacking sobs into his hands. "I can't deal with this," he said, weeping. "I don't know anything anymore, I can't understand anything anymore, and I can't tell what I'm going to do next." His back heaved and shuddered, and Lanyon noticed that the man's clothes were spotted and rotting with filth, and his hands, slick with tears and mucus, were scabbed and damaged, as though he had hammered metal with them.

Lanyon drifted away from the man, not wanting to alarm him further, and leaned against one of the consoles where he could also keep an eye on the two doors.

"Why do you think I'm dead?" Lanyon asked.

The man looked up. His eyes were red and sunken. "The commcon said you were dead. It said you were possessed while you were in the shuttle and you blew open the hatch and died. Director Stattor himself said we all regretted you were dead."

"He was wrong — on all counts," Lanyon said, trying to keep his voice soft and unthreatening.

"But you *could* be dead," the man said. He stood up, and his mouth tightened into a wrinkled slash. "You probably *are* dead, and you probably aren't even here." He came nearer Lanyon, liquidly gliding toward him, his hands in fists. "I'm possessed, you see, and it makes me think I see things, and the only way I can tell if they're real is to fight them." His eyes now had a blank reptilian look. "You're dead," the tall man said in his throat, "and I'm imagining you."

"The hell you are," Lanyon said, coming away from the console. "*I'm* imagining *you*," and when the tall man started to draw back his fist, Lanyon gave him a straight shot to the mouth — a smooth, snapping punch, not too hard, but enough to stop the man where he stood.

"I'm imagining *you*," Lanyon repeated, "and if you'll tell me a few things, I'll imagine that you'll start feeling much better. But if I can't make you feel better, I'm going to make you feel much worse."

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From his pigeon-toed, slack-shouldered position, the man said, "I'm starting to feel more normal already."

"Get back into the chair," Lanyon said.

Moving like his bones were going soft, the man complied. "I hate how I am," he slurred. "I hate everything." When he turned to sit in the chair, Lanyon saw that his face was white and his lips were a swollen gray.

"I saw three people in the observation lounge, so how come there's only you here? Where are the others?"

"I'm the sanest one. We're all possessed . . . by aliens. They're in us." His eyes grew round."If you're imagining me, imagine me dead, all right? If you're not dead, could you kill me? Please? The thing in my mind . . . makes everything confused. I can't think anymore."

"How do you know there are alien parasites on the station — how do you know this isn't a viral psychosis?"

The tall man's face twisted into an ugly grin. Behind his scaly yellow teeth, his white tongue lay like something dead. He brayed like a tortured animal — it was supposed to be a laugh. "I was a psychonaut! I *know* alien minds." Even from the distance of several meters, Lanyon could smell his fetid breath. "My mind was sent out over six hundred times, and the last time, when the sending machine put me back in my body, something was there waiting for me — it had possessed me while I was absent. You think I don't know what an alien mind is like after six hundred trips?" He chuckled, eyes still staring at Lanyon. The man's lips glistened with thick spit. "You think I don't know what's happening to us?"

"What *is* happening?"

The man began to talk rapidly, like a machine, without intonation, as though he recited a litany whose meaning was too profane to contemplate: "What are the symptoms? When they get inside us, things get scrambled. How do they communicate? They don't. Their language sounds like barking, and you can't understand anything, but you can feel their fear. What do they fear? They fear being in us. Why do they inhabit us? Not because they want to. They lose their bodies in the process and they think we're heavy, awkward, stupid grazers. They inhabit us because they found something with their sending machines that they were afraid of — more afraid of than they were afraid of losing their bodies. It told them to leave their planet." He stopped and dropped his eyes and looked at his wrecked hands. When he turned his back back to Lanyon, it was a mask of horror and disgust. "And look at us! *Look at us!*" He hid his hands under his thighs. "The director knows this, and he lets us die."

Lanyon had been thinking that. Why wouldn't Stattor or United Tarassis let the station be moved? At this point, even that might not be

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enough to save those who were unaffected, but what else was there to do?

"Can you get me out of the quarantined area?"

The man breathed heavily. "It's easy. The quarantine is to keep the normals from seeing us. And we don't want to get out. We don't want to do anything but keep taking the somazine they send down here and sleep."

"Somazine?"

The tall man nodded weakly. "We aren't going anywhere. We *need* the somazine." He paused. "But you'll be back when you get possessed. You can leave now, but you'll be back."

"I'm going to try to get the station moved," Lanyon said. "Somebody tried to kill me, and it should have worked — but it didn't — so I'm on borrowed time, anyway."

"Sure," the man said, uninterested.

"I need to get back to the nearest level to 37 that's open."

"That's 33."

"Will you show me the way?"

"Since you're imagining me, imagine your way there."

"Let's cut the spap," Lanyon said. "What's real is what you and I are agreeing on right now: There are aliens here, there's a problem, and if I can get out of the quarantined area, I might be able to help."

The tall man leaned back in the dead formchair, his fibrous hair holding rigidly to his head. A grin crossed his face as his eyes rolled back in his head. "You'd better hope you're wrong about this being real, because if this is real, we don't deserve to survive."

"That's crossed my mind, too," Lanyon said. "But unless you can help me get to Stattor, I might just as well be dead."

"Like the rest of us." The man stared past Lanyon, into space, into some other world. His face was sheened with oily sweat. Then he stood up. Without another word, he went to the door that led to the inner part of the level. Just before he touched the latch, he turned to Lanyon said said dully, "You aren't going to like this."

"I'm used to not liking things."

The door slid open, and the stench rolled over both of them like the wet breath of a carnivore. Worse than the room they left, it was dense, moist, mildewy, rich with decay, and overlaid with the sting of ozone. In Lanyon's lungs the air felt alive with fungus or bacteria or other microorganisms that should be found only in black-watered swamps. And instead of a shining corridor before them, there was a floor cluttered with papers, unwound spools of memory tape, smashed cartons that spilled splintered electronic parts, broken dishes; and a dozen meters away, something heavy and ragged lay against the smeared wall — perhaps it was a body, perhaps it was a pile of greasy rags. He didn't want to look too closely.

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He followed the gangly man farther toward the central drop shaft where gravity was nulled, keeping a safe distance between them in case the man spun around, his eyes again wild and slitted, wanting to test Lanyon's reality by fighting him. Lanyon saw no one else for several minutes, but once, glancing behind him, he saw a shape disappear behind a corner.

"Where is everyone?" he asked finally.

The man said nothing. Instead, he swerved toward one of the closed doors, one labeled "Rest Area A," and pushed it open.

It should have been a comfortable lounging area with old-fashioned stuffed furniture, a few shelves of entertainment tapes, a food and drink dispenser, and some books lying here and there — but it wasn't.

The furniture had been shredded, and the stuffing had been heaped at one end of the room. Eight or nine people, probably mostly women, probably alive, their bodies splayed grotesquely across one another, lay in a pile on the stuffing. Their skin was discolored and crusted with filth and scabs oozing sores.

One of them slowly raised its head and turned its face toward the light. It drew its lips back from its teeth and made several biting movements. Then, rasping, nearly unintelligible, the person said, "Do something . . . to us." It touched its cheek with its fingertips and made a whining noise. "Do you have any somazine?"

From the smell of the room, Lanyon knew that not all the bodies were alive. He stepped back, and the tall man let the door close.

"I told you," the tall man said. "I'm one of the saner ones. I got here only three days ago."

Lanyon's hands were cold and wet. "We've been told that anyone affected has been receiving care in the infirmaries."

"The care we get is the somazine. Every level gets a few handfuls a day. Sometimes people fight over it. Sometimes they hoard enough of it to try to kill themselves." He walked on again toward the drop shaft. "It usually doesn't work. You have to be able to concentrate on eating the stuff for three or four minutes to get it done. Somazine won't let you do that. And besides, the parasites have a stronger will to live than we have."

More to himself than to his guide, Lanyon said, "I know two people whose will to live isn't going to do them a damned bit of good."

Once at the drop shaft, they stepped in and propelled themselves through the zero gravity to Level 33. The tall man had to stop once, grip the handholds along the side of the shaft, and compose himself. A minute later he turned to Lanyon, his face drained of blood, and apologized.

"Those things in us," he said hoarsely, ". . . sometimes they panic." For a moment he looked about to

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weep. "They're as scared of us as we are of them. Are you really going to try to get the station moved out of this place?"

"I'll do what I can. I'm going to cause something to happen. I may end up in the core."

Once they were on 33, the man led Lanyon to an abandoned bank of probe machines. It was here, at one time, that psychonauts had wired themselves in and shot their consciousnesses to thousands of worlds, looking for technology, minerals, intelligence, work animals, anything that could benefit United Tarassis. Now the area had been wrecked, gutted, as had everything else on the quarantined levels. Here each sender had been reduced to a caved-in tangle of wires, melted plastic, and crushed components.

The tall man pointed to a booth that had been cleared out. "Here," he said. "Before things got too bad, I heard that some of the normals who were quarantined in here cut a hole through to the next level. You just go through. It comes out in a storage area."

Lanyon knelt and pulled aside a bent-edged panel that had been propped against the opening.

The tall man's slack face began to twitch, and his mouth opened spastically, as though he were trying to force a word through his larynx that he was not equipped to speak. He made a barking noise and then shook his head wildly. "I don't know! I don't know! *I don't know!*" He began sobbing and beating his face with his fists.

Lanyon slipped away, into the next level.

The filtered air had no odor, and the orderliness of the supplies on the shelves of the storage room gave him great relief. At once he went into the busy corridor and walked among busy normal workers. He overheard snatches of conversation about coffee breaks and dinner and a woman who whispered to another about the color of a man's eyes. It seemed as though he had just stepped out of a nightmare of disease and screaming. It seemed almost as though the tall man had been right: that Lanyon *had* imagined him. But when Lanyon stopped at the edge of the drop shaft, on his way up to 37, his nose caught the smell that still hung in his clothes — the pungency of decay and the wet, dusty smell of dead air.

He stopped off at Level 36 and located a public commcon in the corridor near the drop shaft. After cutting out his return image, he punched in Elle's number — he didn't want his face going over lines that could be monitored. After a full minute of waiting, a rainbow of color flickered and her shape appeared inside, on the ministage.

She did not look well: her hair

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was limp, her eyes were sunken, and she slumped in her formchair. "Who is this?" she asked without expression.

Lanyon altered his voice and said, "We met at a party the other evening. I wondered if I might stop by in a few minutes . . . if I promise not to throw you on the floor."

She said nothing and made no movement, but her whole attitude changed. She leaned minutely forward and peered intently out of the commcon at him. "Security just ransacked my quarters and took away my mate," she said, "so I'm not feeling too well — but if you only wanted to stop by for a few minutes . . ." Her voice was now crisp and alert.

"I'll be there in five minutes," Lanyon said.

She nodded, reached forward, and disconnected. Lanyon turned, trying to appear casual, and surveyed the corridor for anyone who might recognize him. If anything was going to work, it was important that he be thought dead as long as possible.

He saw no one familiar, and, like an animal beginning its stalk, moved into the flow of traffic.

Minutes later he stood in front of Elle's door. She opened it and stared at him. She frowned in disbelief, then stepped aside and he entered.

Without touching, they faced each other.

"They said you were dead." Still, she stared at him as though she weren't sure of what she was seeing.

"I never thought I would see you again. Someone programmed the shuttle into thinking that it was docking when it wasn't, and I was supposed to be decompressed."

Tentatively she reached forward, and her fingers trembled as she touched his shirtfront.

"I got out on one of the quarantined levels and saw what was happening there. Stattor is letting this place turn into an asylum, a death house. So with your help, I'm going to get the station moved."

"They'll kill you." Her fingers twisted tighter and tighter in his shirt.

"They think they already did. They had their chance, and now I have mine."

"It was Dallen," she said, her voice almost inaudible. "Half an hour ago security came and arrested him for your murder. They searched the apartment."

"Half an hour ago? That could have been only minutes after the shuttle hatch blew open. They must have been watching the whole thing."

Her other hand buried itself in the folds of his shirt, and he pulled her to him. She felt weak, and against his chest, she breathed quickly and shallowly. He buried his face in the hair that spilled down the side of her neck. She smelled of freshly crushed grass. Opening his lips, he drew the skin of her neck between his teeth and ran his tongue along it.

"There is something else," she

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said, holding him tighter. "Dallen said things when they were taking him . . . he tried to bribe the security men."

Lanyon pulled his face back from her but still held her tightly in his arms. Her pale eyes were wide and frightened.

"He tried to get you killed in the shuttle because of me — because of us."

Lanyon nodded. "I assumed that."

"And when they were taking him, on Stattor's orders, he . . . lost control . . . and said —"

"And said what?"

"That Stattor was dealing directly with the aliens and letting them take over certain people on the Station." She shook her head nervously. "The security men all laughed and told him he was crazy. Then he said he had contacts with the aliens, too, and that he could protect the security men from being possessed if they would cooperate with him in getting rid of Stattor." She took a deep breath and went on. "They didn't listen, and they webbed him like they do with people who have the pseudopsychosis, and they assured me he would be tended to in the infirmary on Level 26. But . . ." She stared into his eyes, as though wanting him to explain it to her. " . . . he said Stattor was *letting* the aliens possess us. And that would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

"It would." A buzzing rage began pouring through Lanyon's veins. Of course it would explain it. Stattor would allow the aliens to possess people, and Stattor, in return, would receive — what? Wealth, of course, That was the only thing he ever exerted himself for.

Elle pulled away from him for a moment and took from her pocket a small white tube, no larger than her finger. "And then," she said, "there's this." She held it between their faces. "when security scanned the apartment, they found this."

It wasn't familiar to Lanyon. One end of the thing was blunt and the other was tightly wrapped with plastic seal tape.

"What is it?"

Elle seemed to control her breathing only with difficulty. "When the guard found it, I didn't know what it was, either. But I said I'd been looking for it. He grinned at me and said, 'Whatever makes your day,' and gave it to me. After they left, I looked at it, shook it, and smelled it, but it seemed completely inert. It wasn't, though." She stared at the shirt fabric she clenched in her hands, and when she spoke, she paced her words evenly: "They left with Dallen, and I was . . . stunned, so I went in to lie down. I lay crossways on my bed with my head near where I'd hung the mesh-dress I wore when we met."

"And?"

"And I smelled a trace of your scent." She bit her lips. "It was like when I first met you. I wanted you so badly I didn't care about anything

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else. I couldn't think about anything else. In seconds I had become obsessed with you . . . and all I could do was . . ."

She still held the white cylinder in her fist. Lanyon looked carefully at it.

"Pheromone," he said.

She nodded. "Designed to attract me to you. When I've breathed this and then come near you . . ."

"And," Lanyon said, "if I checked my quarters, I would find one just like this, with a slightly different formula in it, one that would make you irresistible to me."

Again, she nodded.

"Stattor," Lanyon said, the bitterness making his voice ragged.

"Stattor," Elle repeated. "Using us."

"To provoke Dallen and to give Stattor an excuse to eliminate him as competition. And my murder was the excuse."

"But why you?"

"That's something I intend to ask," Lanyon said, feeling rage seethe in his blood. More and more, he felt like some scaled animal that was driven by unquestioning, unreasoning *needs*, and the overwhelming need was to destroy Stattor — to go after him with the single-mindedness of a small-brained reptile. Everything else was subservient to that.

"You and I were directed by chemistry," Elle said, " — manipulated by hormones." She stepped back from him. Her eyes were hollow and shadowed with doubt. "What we felt for each other wasn't what we *should* have felt. It wasn't natural for us." She glanced down at the floor between them, looking almost embarrassed. "We were fooled." She held out the cylinder to him. "Take this away from me." She dropped it in his shirt pocket.

"That doesn't matter now," Lanyon said. He felt something cold and soothing come over him. There was no complexity now, and his life seemed as clear and sharp-edged as a knife blade. He now had more excuse than he needed to use whatever means it took to get Stattor to move the station.

"I'm not sure who . . . we are with each other," Elle said. "I'm not sure who I am to you — or you to me."

"There'll be time for that after the station is moved. I want you to call someone for me," Lanyon said. "I don't want my image going through the comm system."

"Whatever you need," she said tonelessly.

He gave her the code and told her what to say. She fed it into the console, pressed the SEND button, and after a pause, Blisson's shape appeared. His clothes were heavily wrinkled, and his face was set and without expression. He sat with one arm hanging limply over the edge of his formchair. "What?" he said.

Elle cleared her throat. "I need some spot-welding equipment," she said. She glanced nervously across

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the room at Lanyon. "Something portable. Lightweight. With a beam focuser."

Blisson stared at her intently. Suddenly he recognized her.

"A mutual friend has an important job to do."

"How big is this job?"

Elle held her arms out, indicating a circumference she thought to be about Stattor's size.

Blisson grinned. "Tell me where you want me to bring it."

Blisson strapped the power module onto the small of Lanyon's back and then ran the feed line up his side and along the bottom of his arm. The plastic was cold against Lanyon's skin. The hot end of the welder terminated just under Lanyon's wrist. The focuser added another three centimeters to its length, which his sleeve, when pulled down, would just conceal. When Lanyon curled his hand back, he would expose the end of the device, and the tension in his arm would trigger a beam that from three meters would put forty-five hundred degrees Celsius on a spot the size of a pencil eraser.

"I brought this, too," Blisson said. "I was saving it for an important occasion." He held in his fingers an orange amp-pack with the usual caution symbol on it. "I'll bet you haven't seen one of these in a long time. Seven milliliters of pure aqueous synadrine with just a touch of equiprin to keep you in touch with the basics of objective reality."

"Jesus."

"I didn't know anybody could still get them," Elle said. "They're dangerous, aren't they? Don't they cause liver damage?"

"Only in amateurs," Lanyon said with a grin. He pulled up a pant leg, located a vein on the inside of his calf, slapped the spot with the flat of his hand to deaden the sting, and then inserted the needle from the amp-pack into his leg.

"Not only will your synapses be operating with greater speed," Blisson said, "but you will also be able to see implications in any event that you ordinarily would overlook. Synadrine is wonderful stuff . . . too wonderful for anyone's good."

Lanyon peeled the adhesive backing from the orange pack, and it adhered to his skin.

"I wish you didn't have to use it," Elle said. "Once again, you're victimizing yourself with chemistry."

"But this time it's my choice."

"When you need it," Blisson said, "just press it firmly. The ampoule ruptures, and then it feeds in."

Lanyon dropped his pant leg, straightened his shirt, and said, "How do I look?"

"Normal," Blisson said. He reached out to shake hands. "Good luck." He held Lanyon's hand a moment longer. "You don't have to do this. We could

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wait and send a dozen people through the cutout into the quarantined area to see what's there. The word would spread . . . a lot of people would start demanding something be done."

"If what I do doesn't work, do that. But I have a personal interest here. Stattor chose me to die so he'd have an excuse to off Dallen. I want to express my disapproval with this welder."

"You *want* to kill him," Blisson said.

"More than anything." Lanyon felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle and rise. "I'm doing this for myself. It'll help the people in quarantine. Did I tell you? — Stattor sends them somazine."

Blisson winced. "If they weren't crazy to start with, they will be after a few weeks of using that stuff."

"But I'm doing this for myself," Lanyon said.

Elle stood quietly and said nothing.

"I have to do this. I *need* to do it. There is a thing in my blood that tells me that Stattor is mine — *mine*, like he thought my life was his." Lanyon could barely concentrate on what he was saying — he wanted to get on with it. "Time to go. You're sure he's on 39, at another party?"

"I checked with a friend, and that's where he was twenty minutes ago."

Elle had been standing aside, but now she came forward and faced Lanyon, resting her forearms on his shoulders. "Don't do this," she said. "You aren't sounding like yourself. And even if you can get near him . . . even if you . . ." She didn't seem to be able to say the next word.

"The man is a murderer. He deserves to die."

"But do you *want* to do it?"

"Wanting is irrelevant. I need to do this."

Her pale eyes seemed to search for something in his face. Solemnly, gently, she kissed him once on the lips. "You're still being driven by chemistry. Good-bye. I wish I had had more time to look at you, so I could remember your face, and hands, and voice. Good-bye." She dropped her arms and stepped back from him.

"I'll try to come back," he said.

She nodded and turned away.

In the corridor Lanyon hurried to the drop shaft. As he drifted to Level 39, he took the pheromone dispenser from his pocket and pretended to study it with his head down, hoping to avoid recognition. No one spoke to him, and in several minutes he was on 39, approaching one of the gathering rooms where already he could hear the noise of a hundred chattering people, and in the hallway, he could smell the faint spicy reek of a dozen liquors.

Outside the door a few couples leaned against the walls and spoke in low tones, holding drinks of various colors at chest level. For a moment Lanyon thought how, a day ago, he

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had been one of them, consumed with thoughts of Elle and her hair and skin and eyes, a slave to the pheromone Stattor had concocted him.

Lanyon paused, reached down, and gave the amp-pack a firm press. He felt something in it break, and then he began to count slowly to ten, still thinking of Elle — how he wanted to get back to her, lie down in silence with her — but at the count of six, his vision flamed momentarily red, and all he could think of was Stattor — Stattor — Stattor — fat, sweating Stattor — vicious, murdering Stattor —

His body became light as air, and he felt as though his blood glowed inside his skin. How could anyone not notice the difference in him?

A quick glance at a nearby couple gave him quantities of information: the man's wary glances, his clothing and shoes, the woman's casual elegance, the way they stood, the way they spoke, and it was clear through the amplification of the synadrine that the man was afraid of being caught by his mate talking to this woman, and that he had not told her that he was connected. Lanyon wondered if, once he was inside the party room, he would be overwhelmed by the input of information.

As he approached the door, it opened and two heavy security men hustled out a woman whose head lolled slackly on her shoulders; with every step the men took, the woman's head rolled from side to side.

The woman gurgled and muttered, and the only words Lanyon heard were, " . . . I don't understand . . . what I am."

One of the men glanced at Lanyon, did a double take, and stopped in his tracks. He recognized him.

"Pseudopsychosis?" Lanyon asked casually, nodding toward the woman they held.

"Hold it," the one guard said to both his partner and to Lanyon. The woman's legs jellied, and she sagged between them. "You were decompressed in a shuttle today — you're supposed to be dead." His face showed puzzlement, but behind that, Lanyon could see layers of anger — the man was faced with an ambiguity, and he didn't like it. He was the type who would consult his superiors to have it clarified.

"What gives here?" the other security man said.

"Come with us," said the first man, releasing the woman and reaching for Lanyon — but Lanyon wasn't there.

It didn't require thinking to avoid the man's slow grasp — Lanyon's body simply responded by twisting aside.

The big men had been trained in the subtleties of brutality: the woman was tossed aside like a rag, and in a fraction of a second, one of the men had blocked Lanyon's escape and the other one had already positioned himself and had shot a pistonlike fist at

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Lanyon's face. Lanyon brushed the fist away with his open hand, and, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do, he kicked sideways and his heel buried itself two inches into the guard's solar plexus. It dropped him instantly.

Without looking, Lanyon knew the other man would reach for his weapon, but with his own muscles pumped up and his synapses firing high amperage, it was not difficult to step close to the man, bump him off-balance, and make him step backward, just enough to separate his thighs at the groin, and then lift him a few centimeters into the air with a knee snap. The man toppled backward like a column, the back of his head bouncing twice on the floor.

Exhilarated and glowing with barely restrained energy, Lanyon turned to the couple, who stared at him with round, horrified eyes.

"I'm supposed to be dead," Lanyon explained, "and when they saw I wasn't, they were going to rectify their error."

The man swallowed audibly.

Lanyon pointed to the woman the two security men had brought out of the party room — her eyes rolled wildly in their sockets. "Take her to the nearest lounge, and do yourselves a favor: Stay with her and don't talk to anyone else for twenty minutes."

The nervous man quickly put his drink on the floor and said, "I was just going to suggest that myself." He ignored Lanyon and began helping the stricken woman to her feet.

The other woman, just now coming away from the wall, put down her drink and began helping with the limp woman. "You're going after Stattor," she said. "Good luck. You won't make it, though. Nobody ever does. He's got six plainclothesmen with him. But good luck, anyway." She looked like she meant it.

"Just give me twenty minutes," Lanyon said.

He turned from them and pushed open the door to the party room. A wave of noise and smells broke over him. The room was brilliantly lit, and his first glance told him that Stattor, fat and carefree and oozing oil, was across the room, near the bar, surrounded by parasitic section directors, all smiling and bowing and radiating tissue-thin goodwill.

Lanyon reached to the small of his back and clicked off the safety on the welder.

Before, as another sycophant, he had never noticed the security arrangements at a party Stattor attended, but now, with his blood bathing his cortex in sensory amplifiers, he easily identified five of the men and women who steadily surveyed the crowd for any threat to their man. The sixth agent, a woman in white and ruffles, was nearer Lanyon, apparently watching the far end of the bar.

Watching Stattor's sweating, grinning head, his face a rigid mask of

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wonderful, humble happiness, Lanyon felt something mindless and reptilian rise out of the center of his brain, something unblinking and without emotion that did not consider its own death a factor worth consideration. Lanyon's lips parted several millimeters, and the tip of his tongue flicked back and forth against the edges of his teeth.

In three seconds he could burn off the top of Stattor's head and cause his fatted brains to boil in the falling cup of his skull. Three seconds later, at the most, the security men would nail him and slice him in symmetrical chunks with their zeta shears, but at least Stattor would be gone — and Lanyon would die at ease.

The crowd roiled momentarily, pushing him a step to one side. Lanyon extended his arm, aimed for the fat man's head, and jerked back his hand, flexing the muscles that would fire the welder.

Nothing happened.

A sweet-smelling woman in white and ruffles slid in front of him. "Sometimes too many people are invited, and we have to squeeze around each other." She had a narrow, pointed nose and thin lips that parted to reveal perfectly aligned teeth. She held a drink high in front of her breasts, and turned away from him momentarily as she sipped from it. "Stay calm," she said. "Your weapon won't work. I disabled it after I felt it on you."

She turned out her right palm and revealed a pulse-plate — a device that would overload with an electromagnetic pulse any unshielded components she held it near. "Director Stattor wants you to bring him a drink. And he wants to speak to you. Tonight he's drinking greenpearls, no ice."

Feeling helpless now, like a small animal being drawn toward great gaping jaws, Lanyon said nothing and did not move. Whatever reptilian thing in him that had dispassionately wanted to spill Stattor's blood now receded to the deepest caverns of his unconscious, and he was left alone in the midst of the crowd, knowing that Stattor had bested him in this game of reptiles, and that he was inviting him over first to humiliate him and then to sentence him to be shot into the core. Tonight there would be no shortage of electricity.

"He wants the drink *now*," the woman said pleasantly.

Lanyon moved dumbly toward the bar. His hands, he thought, he still had his hands . . . and the effects of the amp-pack were still with him. He had his hands, but the guards were now aware of him, and they had weapons. Lanyon knew he was near the end of his evening.

He leaned his arms on the cool surface of the bar. "A greenpearl, no ice," he said to the barman. He was the same man who had served him the night before.

"Good evening again," the man

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said. "I heard you were dead."

"The report was only a couple of hours premature."

"Trouble with the director?"

Lanyon nodded.

The barman smoothly selected a glass and held it up to the light to inspect it. "This drink is for the director, I presume?"

Lanyon said it was.

The barman did not look at Lanyon as he mixed the greenpearl. "Sometimes, with all the smoking and humidity in here, and with the way the dispensers are built, leaking and all, we get corrosion in the valves." He held the opalescent green drink up to the light and studied it casually. "So we use this thing to keep the valves clean."

Lanyon looked at the tool the barman laid on the narrow ledge on the inside of the bar. It was a fifteen-centimeter probe with a power pack handgrip. It was very sharp. "Specially designed ultrasonic airblast cleaner. I heard a person was killed with one a few weeks ago. It pumps out about two liters of air in about a tenth of a second. It blew this guy's heart up like a balloon." The barman fondled a damp rag and stared emptily across the crowded room. "Good luck with the director," he said, turning his back and leaving the probe within Lanyon's reach.

Again, the unblinking thing crawled into Lanyon's mind that wanted Stattor's death, but some other part — some part that for a moment, like the moment in the shuttle when he was seized by a kind of rationality born of a desire to stay alive — *that* part of him refused to be driven by Jurassic chemistry and said, *Consider what you want.*

His blood told him to gut Stattor, to dig out his liver with his hands, regardless of the consequences, but his heart told him that he wanted to move the station, to where perhaps the alien invasion could be stemmed, to where perhaps he again could bury his face in Elle's hair and breathe in her smell and taste her skin.

The barman turned to face Lanyon and saw that the probe had not been touched. Sweat lined the edge of his scalp. "Well," he said, "maybe next time," and he put the probe away.

Lanyon paid him little attention — he was trying to think, trying to choose what he should do, trying to push his reptilian part back into oblivion, so the rest of his brain could think.

"Ice," he said suddenly. The barman eyed him suspiciously. "I want some ice in this drink," Lanyon said.

"The director doesn't take ice."

"Ice in the drink. Lots of it."

The barman clinked in a few cubes and turned away.

From his pocket Lanyon took the pheromone capsule and peeled off the tape, revealing a dozen small perforations. He held the capsule by his fingertips only, not wanting the

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warmth of his skin to excite the gasses. He touched the perforated end of the tiny cylinder to the side of an ice cube. The ice would lower the temperature of the gaseous pheromones, and they would lie in the glass in an invisible layer, atop the green liquor.

He stalled as long as he thought he could get away with it, and when he saw the woman in white and lace coming toward him, he slipped the cylinder back into his pocket and quickly fished out the ice cubes and left them on the bar.

"Just going now," he said to the woman as she came up behind him. He turned from the bar and tried to hold the drink so that any air turbulence would be minimized as he crossed the room to the waiting fat man.

Stattor sweated in the midst of the fawning section directors, but at Lanyon's approach, the fat man must have said something because they all nodded, bowed, smiled, and left him alone. Behind Stattor stood one tall blond bodyguard, his hands behind his back.

"Mr. Lanyon, Mr. Lanyon," Stattor said, reaching for the drink. "I was getting parched."

The fat man put his lips around the edge of the glass and drank half of it down, snorting in gasps of air between swallows.

"Thank you," he said breathlessly. "Too bad Mr. Dallen tried to depress you." He was still smiling, twisting his head side to side in a parody of disbelief. "I thought he had actually done it — in fact" — he jerkily waved one short arm toward the ceiling — "the lighting about now is probably thanks to Mr. Dallen. I'm very curious how you got back into the station."

"Why me, Stattor?" Lanyon said, keeping the tall bodyguard within his peripheral vision. "Why did you choose me to be the meat? How was I picked to provide you with the excuse to send Dallen to the core?"

"Luck, Mr. Lanyon, just luck." He stared into his drink with his tiny eyes. "I had nothing against you personally — but you had ruined some of our equipment, you were off duty, and your absence would provide no hardship. It wasn't personal. I don't allow my personal feelings to direct what I do." He looked at Lanyon oddly. The rigid expression on his face altered for a moment. "I don't allow my emotions to interfere with what I do," he repeated. "Mr. Dallen had made an arrangement with a certain alien group that — " Stattor swallowed dryly and then poured the other half of the drink down his throat. " . . . an agreement that obstructed the business of United Tarassis." He breathed heavily. "Had I known you personally, Mr. — What was your first name?" he asked, edging closer.

"You know what's happening on the quarantined levels, don't you? I've

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seen those people. Why do you let it go on?"

"I have a suggestion," Stattor said, sweat rolling down his temples. "I've been needing someone to help me with the details of my work. And you . . ." He wheezed, momentarily losing his breath.

The tall blond bodyguard watched them both carefully.

"I need someone, and . . . an attractive man who could oversee so much." His voice lowered, and he spoke secretively to Lanyon, edging still closer. "There is so much money in this work." He gripped Lanyon's arm in his hand. Lanyon moved back, but Stattor moved with him. "I have an agreement with the aliens," he whispered thickly, "and that makes me and those I choose perfectly safe from being possessed. I let them inhabit our people if they leave key workers alone and" — white saliva trailed between Stattor's lips as he spoke faster and faster — "and if the station functions another six weeks, you and I, Lanyon, we can buy an entire — " He stared into Lanyon's eyes. "This is purely business, you understand. . . . I never let my feelings for omebody enter into . . . business. But you and I . . ." He suddenly grabbed Lanyon's other arm and pulled him vise-tight against his distended belly.

Lanyon saw over Stattor's shoulder that the blond security man's jaw had dropped open. And others around the room had broken off their chatter and were beginning to watch.

"Come with me," Stattor said in Lanyon's face. Sweat ran around the corners of his mouth, and his thick breath smelled of turning meat. "Come with me and we can—" His eyes went wide, and he tried to force Lanyon closer yet.

Lanyon twisted his arms out of Stattor's grip, but Stattor grabbed him again. "You *let* the aliens come onto the station," he said loud enough to be heard by some of the bystanders.

"Come with me and live, Lanyon, or stay here and die. I *need* you." His eyes alternately squinted and bulged. Around his neck the fabric of his collar was soaked with sweat. "I need you, Lanyon, I can make you rich!"

"I would rather die," Lanyon said into the fat man's face. As repelled as he was, he struggled only enough to attract more attention.

Strattor could barely speak through his heavy breathing. "I need you — and I want you to know that what I can't have, I can have killed —because I won't be rejected, Lanyon," he said, trying to dig his fingers into Lanyon's clothes and hold him near. "I won't let myself be hurt — I won't let my feelings get in the way of my work."

"No."

Stattor reached behind himself and spoke over his shoulder to the blond guard: "Weapon."

The bodyguard hesitated a mo-

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ment and then placed a zeta shear in the man's fat hand.

Stattor still held onto Lanyon with his left hand. Between their faces he waved the weapon. "You *have* to want me," he whispered loudly.

Lanyon again struggled feebly, throwing them both off-balance and causing Stattor to stagger toward the exterior wall of the room.

"You could be wealthy enough to have your own station," Stattor said desperately, saliva caking in the corners of his mouth. Sweat ran out of his hair. "You and I — we could do anything." Stattor's finger now rested on the trigger of the shear.

Lanyon knew that the crowd had now quieted and had moved away from them, back against the far walls. Only Stattor's breathing and their staggering, shuffling feet broke the silence of the room. Lanyon had up till now been letting his reason guide his actions, but now he decided to release himself from that bondage —he *chose* to let his feelings speak, and the flat-eyed demon came forth.

"Stattor," he whispered, "get fucked and die."

He brought his knee up sharply at the same moment as his free hand swept across and peeled the zeta shear from the fat man's grip. Lanyon moved like liquid, the synadrine dumping its full power into his system. In half a second he had rolled his thumb across the weapon's density adjustment, setting it on its tightest beam — then he fired at the exterior wall behind the nutted, crumpling Stattor.

Lanyon's ears popped as the air in the room shot out the thumb-sized hole behind the fat man. He shoved Stattor against the hole and watched as the man's body jerked spastically, becoming less obese with each spasm, the clothes hanging looser on his frame, as his organs and entrails and fat spewed into space through the tiny hole in the wall.

As Stattor hung there, mouth agape, his lifeless tongue sticking rigidly out of his whitening face, Lanyon casually tossed the weapon back to the blond bodyguard.

"Obviously," Lanyon said, "the director was possessed when he allowed aliens free rein on the station."

Around the three walls the crowd began to breathe again. Bit by bit they moved into the center of the room, clinging to each other. The bodyguard looked numbly at the weapon he held.

" I don't know what to do," he said softly.

"First," Lanyon said, I suggest we get the station the hell out of here."

A man, a fourth-degree engineer by the colors he wore on his shoulder, stepped out of the crowd. "We could have the jump field generated in an hour, but we can't do it unless these people" — he nodded vaguely at the bodyguards — "let us."

The woman in white and lace

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stepped around Stattor's thin body and said, "We've all got friends in quarantine." She paused. "You make the call. The director was obviously possessed."

Stattor's limp body hung on the wall, buried now in wads of oversized clothing. On his blood-drained face was an expression of utter surprise.

Elle stood across the bed from him. As she pulled her shirt over her head, her breasts quivered from side to side.

"I've been sane for a whole afternoon now," Lanyon said. "Too long." He laid his pants on the chair with his shirt.

"Then let go," she said. Pulling her shirt off had bushed her hair up around her head. She looked wild. Lanyon watched the muscles dance in her arms as she unfastened her belt. "Decide to be your other self," she said.

Lanyon stared at her across the white rectangle of the bed and felt himself choose: he becme simpler and more direct — his questions and reasons, the *whys* and *shoulds* and *becauses* and *what ifs* dissolved into the smooth fabric of desire. He lived in his skin and his mouth and his hands, and he wanted the woman across the bed from him. Her eyes, like his, glittered feverishly, and like two animals, they circled each other cautiously, ready to spring.

Coming soon

Next month: Three exceptional novelets: "The Man Who Made the Fur Fly" by John Brunner, "Side Effects" by Walter Jon Williams, and "The Embezzled Blessing" by Robert M. Green, Jr. Also, the report on competition 37, which was squeezed out of this issue.

Soon: New stories by Ron Goulart, Jane Yolen, Richard Cowper, George Alec Effinger, Damon Knight, Keith Roberts, Fred Saberhagen, Gene Wolfe and many others.

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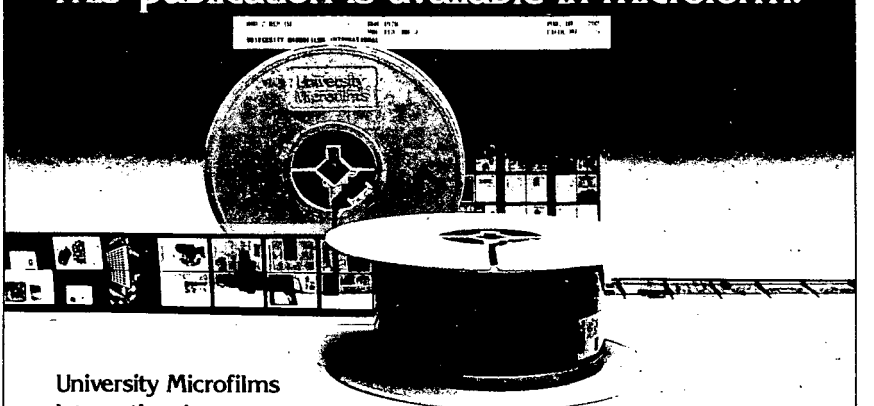

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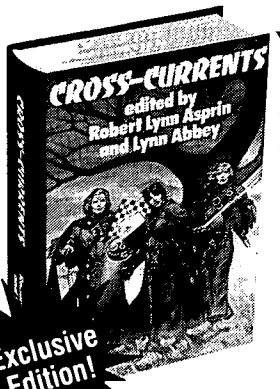

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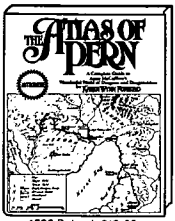

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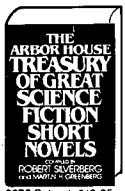

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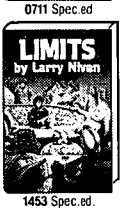

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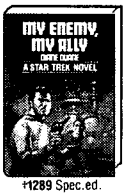

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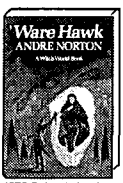

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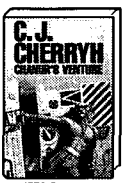

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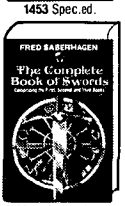

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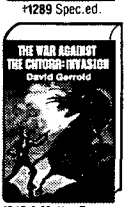

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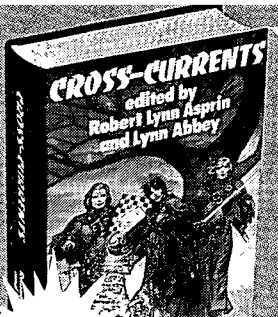

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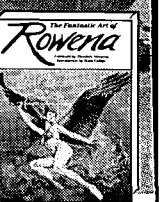

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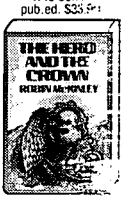

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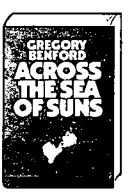

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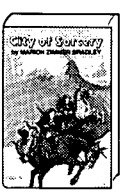

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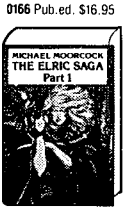

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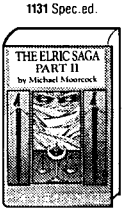

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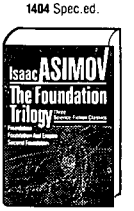

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